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A study of the history of the  
Rockey Mountain House area.

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
BUREAU OF PLANT INDUSTRY

WASHINGTON, D. C.

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF, BUREAU OF PLANT INDUSTRY

REPORT OF THE CHIEF, BUREAU OF PLANT INDUSTRY

FOR THE YEAR 1911

THE BUREAU OF PLANT INDUSTRY, established in 1902, has during the year 1911, continued its work in the investigation and promotion of the plant industries of the United States. The Bureau has been particularly active in the study of the various plant products of the country, and in the development of the same for commercial purposes. The Bureau has also been engaged in the study of the various plant diseases and insects which attack the same, and in the development of methods for their control. The Bureau has also been engaged in the study of the various plant products of the country, and in the development of the same for commercial purposes. The Bureau has also been engaged in the study of the various plant diseases and insects which attack the same, and in the development of methods for their control.

NAME OF PLANT	NAME OF PRODUCT	QUANTITY PRODUCED	VALUE OF PRODUCT
Apple	Apples	1,000,000 bushels	\$1,000,000
Banana	Bananas	500,000 bunches	\$500,000
Citrus	Oranges	2,000,000 boxes	\$2,000,000
Coconut	Coconuts	1,000,000 bunches	\$1,000,000
Custard Apple	Custard Apples	1,000,000 bunches	\$1,000,000
Guava	Guavas	1,000,000 bunches	\$1,000,000
Jackfruit	Jackfruits	1,000,000 bunches	\$1,000,000
Lemon	Lemons	1,000,000 boxes	\$1,000,000
Lime	Limes	1,000,000 boxes	\$1,000,000
Mango	Mangoes	1,000,000 bunches	\$1,000,000
Orange	Oranges	1,000,000 boxes	\$1,000,000
Pineapple	Pineapples	1,000,000 bunches	\$1,000,000
Plantain	Plantains	1,000,000 bunches	\$1,000,000
Quince	Quinces	1,000,000 bunches	\$1,000,000
Starfruit	Starfruits	1,000,000 bunches	\$1,000,000
Watermelon	Watermelons	1,000,000 bunches	\$1,000,000



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCE

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

The undersigned hereby certify that they have read and recommend to the School of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "A STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE AREA", submitted by Elmer Samuel Gish, B.Ed., in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Professor ..... *M. H. Long*

Professor ..... *Ross W. Collins*

Professor ..... *A. G. Thomas*

Date *October 28<sup>th</sup> 1952*

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## ABSTRACT

The first part of this thesis traces the history of the fur trade in the Rocky Mountain House area from 1799, the year in which the original trading post was built near the mouth of the Clearwater River, to the abandonment of the last fort in 1875. For many years Rocky Mountain House remained the most southwestern post in the Saskatchewan District, having been retained by the Hudson's Bay Company after the Union of 1821 to accommodate the Blackfoot tribes.

The second portion describes the period of settlement as well as the economic and social development of the community. Finally, the gradual emergence of Rocky Mountain House from a village to a town is outlined.

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A STUDY OF THE HISTORY  
OF  
THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE AREA

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Arts

by

Elmer Samuel Gish  
Edmonton, Alberta





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## CHAPTER ONE

### A TOPOGRAPHICAL SURVEY OF ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE AREA IN 1810

Rocky Mountain House has been a popular name in the history of western fur trade, and its use to designate several different posts on the east side of the Rocky Mountains has probably caused readers of Western Canadian history as much confusion as Fort des Prairies, a generic term successively or simultaneously shared by various establishments in the Saskatchewan District. There were five posts which at some time or other were called by the name of the mountains. (1)

(1) These establishments belonged to the North West Company.

The most notable Rocky Mountain House was the establishment near the confluence of the Clearwater and the North Saskatchewan Rivers, but there was also an important Mountain House situated on the west bank of the Athabasca River between Brule Lake and Jasper Lake, a short distance above the mouth of Moose Creek and, it would appear, on or near the site of Miette station on the Canadian National Railway. This fort, more generally known as Jasper House, was built about 1800, and bore a relation to the Yellowhead and Athabasca Passes like that which the original Rocky Mountain House maintained to the Howse Pass. Another Mountain House was erected by William Henry closer to the Athabasca headwaters near the mouth of the Miette river in the vicinity of the present town of Jasper. This post was also known as Henry House, but was on a different location from that of the present Henry House situated lower down the Athabasca River on the Canadian National line. A fourth Rocky



Mountain House stood on the Peace River, though it was better known as Hudson's Hope. David Thompson, who visited this place in 1804, gave its location as latitude  $56^{\circ} 12' 54''$  N., longitude  $120^{\circ} 38' 03''$  W. Finally, the fifth fort so called was built in 1800 by John Thomson (2) on the Mackenzie River

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(2) A clerk in the North West Company.

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below Fort Simpson, "N. of latitude  $62^{\circ}$  and somewhere about Longitude  $123^{\circ}$ , in view of the mountains." (3)

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(3) Elliott Coues, NEW LIGHT ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE GREATER NORTHWEST, (New York: Harper, 1897) Vol. 2, p. 642, footnote 5.

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Eventually the name Rocky Mountain House applied only to those posts, and later to the town, which were located near the forks formed by the North Saskatchewan and its great tributary, the Clearwater. Though Thompson in his "Narrative" occasionally called it Clearwater House or "Rivière l'Eau Claire House", this fort seems never to have had another name that came into general use. Acton House was built by the Hudson's Bay Company about half a mile from the original North West post, but it appears to have been abandoned in 1821, and had always been overshadowed by Rocky Mountain House.

Peter Pangman was the first white man known to have seen the mountains from this region of the Saskatchewan District, but his impressions of the country do not appear anywhere in print. Fortunately, Alexander Henry the Younger left a brief account of the westward view from the hill on which Pangman stood, as well as an informative description of the area in general. From Pangman's Pine, about four and a half miles above the mouth of the Clearwater, Henry viewed the winding



course of the North Saskatchewan River, the most important geographic feature of the Rocky Mountain House area. The primary source of the North Branch is Snow Dome in the Columbia Ice Field, where it begins as an icy cascade 6000 feet above sea level, but swells rapidly as it gathers numerous mountain streams into its channel. The Howse River, which arises near the historic pass known by the same name, the Siffleur River, the Clina River and the Ram River, considerably increase the volume of the main artery as it descends in a north-easterly direction, and then almost due east from Skunda Creek until it meets the Clearwater where it turns abruptly to the north. The forks formed by these two rivers marked, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the focal point of the south-westernmost fur trading region in British North America.

The Clearwater, which derived its name from its extremely transparent water, is a lengthy tributary and during a swift and tortuous course drains a large area into the North Saskatchewan. It arises in the mountains near Mt. Willingdon, not far from the headwaters of the Red Deer and Bow Rivers, but taking the opposite direction from the latter, it follows a north-easterly course until it reaches a point about one mile due west of Butte where it is deflected northward to the Saskatchewan. The Clearwater was not used as a waterway but an old Piegan trail followed its pine-studded banks for some distance upstream. Thompson used this path on several occasions during his explorations to the south. In the late autumn of 1800, accompanied by Duncan McGillivray





and four other men, he set out on horseback up the Clearwater trail, and eventually reached the Bow and Spitchee Rivers which he partially explored. (4)

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(4) J.B.Tyrrell, DAVID THOMPSON'S NARRATIVE (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1916)

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The more important channel was, of course, the North Saskatchewan itself for it provided the traders with a canoe route to Fort Augustus and Fort Edmonton, as well as a convenient passage through the mountain barrier to the west. The original North West fort stood on the north bank of the Saskatchewan about one and a half miles above the mouth of the Clearwater, on a site formerly covered with "aspen and pine". By 1810, however, much of the surrounding brush and wood had been cleared by axe and frequent fires, revealing to Alexander Henry "a grand view of the Rocky Mountains, lying nearly south-west". (5) At this point the distance be-

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(5) Coues, op. cit., p.701.

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tween the river banks was 250 yards, and during highwater the whole bed was flooded. In its ordinary state the channel "was only 30 yards wide, and interrupted by a strong rapid, where the water [rushed] among some large stones, forming a cascade whose perpetual roaring [made] it a dismal neighbour in this solitary spot." (6) According to Henry's journal

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(6) Ibid, p.701.

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this was the first true rapid, though not the last, to be encountered above the forks, and navigation by canoe became more dangerous and tedious as one proceeded upstream from the



fort. Canoes usually had to travel with half cargoes en route to the Kootenay Plains, and often the traders found it necessary to use pack-horses to convey their supplies.

The journey was actually less arduous in winter as dog sleds could move over the frozen river quite easily, except when piles of broken ice obliged the travellers to take to land. Henry the Younger used "a kind of cariole made by stretching a wet parchment of mooseskins over a few timbers, to which it was well secured with a line." (7)

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(7) Ibid, p.677.

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Ensconced in this vehicle with a buffalo robe to cover him, the rider enjoyed considerable comfort, and the climb was not so noticeable as when one had to paddle against the swift current.

About half a mile above the fort a light gray stone (some of it tinged with yellow and white) was visible in the precipitous banks; this stone was used to sharpen "axes and other tools" and was found to be as excellent as European grindstones. Further upstream near the location of Pangman's Pine, nature provided a white clay of fine quality which was used for whitewashing the buildings. The banks of the Saskatchewan satisfied still another important need; three hundred yards below the fort, coal was tumbling into the river where the strong current undermined the bank. In other places the river had uncovered solid beds of coal which were "several feet thick for several acres". Often it was mixed with "earth, clay and stones", but in its pure form the smith used Saskatchewan coal in his forge, where, combined with





"equal proportions of charcoal made from birch or aspen", it produced sufficient heat to mould or repair axes and other implements. (8)

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(8) Ibid, p.701.

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Below the forks the North Saskatchewan was full of shoals and islands some of which were wooded, but the river, being wider here, was evidently fairly navigable, though the current was swift. Henry travelled down it in a boat with six other men in October, 1810, on his way to meet David Thompson who at that time was near Boggy Hall (9) just below

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(9) A former North West post abandoned in 1808 owing to the depletion of beaver in the area.

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the present Blue Rapids. The country on both sides of the river he described as "dreary"; "thick woods (of pine and willow) and burnt tracts [occurred] in many places, with ... small ... plains at intervals." (10) There were many vestiges

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(10) Coues, p.651.

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of beaver as well as the dung and sporn of "buffalo, moose, red deer, cabbrie [antelope] and grizzly bear". (11) The

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(11) Ibid, p.653.

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latter beasts were so numerous in the Rocky Mountain House area as to be a nuisance to the hunters, for often the bears devoured the carcasses of the buffalo before the meat could be conveyed to the hunting tents. Henry's supply of furs in November, 1810, consisting of "720 beavers, 33 grizzly bears, 20 buffalo robes, 300 muskrats, 100 lynxes," (12) provides

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(12) Ibid, p.660.

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further evidence of the type and quantity of wild life that inhabited the country surrounding Rocky Mountain House.



The region of the upper Saskatchewan, particularly west of the fort, was heavily wooded, though small meadows occurred at intervals and bogland was common. The wood was chiefly pine of several varieties, but aspen, willow and birch were also plentiful. Henry speaks frequently of "a Rocky Mountain pine" which was used extensively in building as the wood was soft, easily worked and when well seasoned acquired a yellowish hue with a "smooth glossy surface". This region was noted also for its white spruce which was later used by the Hudson's Bay men in the construction of the plain but serviceable York boats. Henry mentions another tree which he called "juniper or epinette rouge"; it was frequently found on bogland, but being scraggy served no constructive purpose.

Among the pines there grew a kind of horse-tail, four inches high and very thin, which was nourishing food for the horses but this plant was useless for winter foraging "as it [became] so brittle that when the horses [scraped] away the snow with their hoofs, they [broke] the grass into small pieces". (13) The problem of feeding the horses during the

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(13) Ibid, p.700.

winter was indeed a constant worry, especially when snow was so deep it prevented the animals from foraging for the long coarse grass in the swamps.

Pine is known to thrive on barren ground, and Henry even then recognized the inferior quality of the soil describing it as "in general sand, covered with thin black mold which [he did] not suppose would answer for agriculture." (14) A

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(14) Ibid, p.700.



local supply of fresh vegetables, foodstuffs too bulky to be brought in from elsewhere, would certainly have relieved the monotony of their meat diet, but climate and sparse soil had combined against the horticultural efforts of the fur traders. Although gardens were frequently started, they "never produced anything worth the trouble". In that frosty and barren country potatoes were the only vegetable that ever reached maturity. Little did they dream that early varieties of grain and vegetables together with new farming methods would some day make agriculture a productive industry in the Rocky Mountain House area. In the opinion of Alexander Henry this austere land, through which the waters of the upper Saskatchewan had cut a valley more than 150 feet deep, was useful only as a habitat for the beaver and other game so essential to the welfare of the fur trader.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### THE PROBLEM OF THE FORTS

The task of determining the correct number of trading posts in a certain area, and their precise locations, is extremely difficult unless the ruins are still visible. At Rocky Mountain House there were long periods when no journals were kept, and therefore it is possible that unrecorded removals took place when sanitary conditions became bad and buildings deteriorated, when firewood could no longer be easily gathered, or, perhaps, when frequent threats of Indian attack prompted the traders to seek a stronger defensive position. A number of places near the North Saskatchewan have been suggested as possible sites of old trading posts, but some of these are undoubtedly the remains of "whip saw" pits or Indian graves. There is, however, some evidence to support the assumption that at least three separate posts were built near the mouth of the Clearwater River during a period of seventy-six years.

The North West Company was the first to establish a fort on the upper Saskatchewan, probably early in the fall of 1799, and in October of the same year James Bird of the Hudson's Bay Company erected Acton House close by. After the Union of 1821 "Rocky Mountain House", a name originated by the Canadians, became the official designation of the single trading post kept open in this region, but one cannot assume that it was Acton House which was vacated under the new organization. Francis Heron, who was in charge of Edmonton House for a number of years before the coalition, frequently used





"Mountain House" in referring to the Hudson's Bay post, and Anthony Feistel, who kept the Edmonton Journal during the outfit of 1820-21, also used both names. Indeed, several months before the news of the coalition reached Fort Edmonton, the term "Acton House" had disappeared altogether from the pages of the journal.

Considerable confusion naturally arises from the indiscriminate use of one name in connection with two different establishments, making it difficult to decide with complete certainty which fort continued in operation. It is known, however, that "in the Athabaska country, predominantly the land of the North-West Company, the English posts gave way to the Canadian", and "on the Saskatchewan the Canadian posts gave way to their English rivals." (1) If the reorganized

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(1) A.S.Morton, A HISTORY OF THE CANADIAN WEST (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd., n.d.) p.466.

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company followed this arrangement without variation, then the post that was retained on the upper Saskatchewan must have been Acton House. On the other hand, if this was not done, it is possible that an exception was made in the case of Rocky Mountain House which for two years after the Union was under the charge of former Northwesters, Chief Traders John Rowand and Joseph Felix la Rocque, who, if they had any choice in the matter, would probably have elected to keep the Canadian fort. (2)

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(2) See Appendix A for "List of Men in Charge of Rocky Mountain House After the Union of 1821".

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Not until 1864 and 1866 do Edmonton and Rocky Mountain House journals reveal that a new fort was under construction,



but a different post might have been built sometime during one of the intervals for which no records are available. (3)

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- (3) The Hudson's Bay Company Archives in London have only the following Rocky Mountain House journals:
- (a) 1828-29, kept by Henry Fisher, clerk.
  - (b) 1829-30, kept by Henry Fisher, clerk.
  - (c) 1830-31, kept by Henry Fisher, clerk.
  - (d) 1836-37, kept by John E. Harriott, chief trader.
  - (e) 1866-68, kept by John Sinclair.
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Considerable building activity was going on throughout the winter of 1830-31. During this season Henry Fisher, clerk in charge, refers frequently to the construction of a "New House", a "trading shop" and an "Indian House", but his entries give no indication as to whether an entirely new location had been selected at this time. Dr. Hector's journal tells us that in 1858 Rocky Mountain House was situated about half a mile from the mouth of the Clearwater River, clearly on a different site from that of the original North West post which was nearly a mile further upstream. Though the Archives Department of the Hudson's Bay Company could find no definite information relevant to the location of Acton House, there is a possibility that this post stood in a corner of Mrs. C. Brierley's farmyard, (about 200 yards below the North West fort) where a depression containing stones and decayed logs used to be visible. It is equally possible, however, that Acton House was situated on the same spot as the fort which Dr. Hector visited in 1858, and which was temporarily abandoned three years later by Joseph Brazeau.

The first fort, (4) like subsequent posts, was sit-

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- (4) There is some variation in the estimation of the distance of the original fort from the mouth of the Clearwater River. D.J.B.Tyrrell states that this post "was situated





on the north side of the North Saskatchewan River, a mile and a quarter above the mouth of the Clearwater River". (DAVID THOMPSON'S NARRATIVE OF HIS EXPLORATIONS IN WESTERN AMERICA, p.190.) Elliott Coues, on the other hand, states that Rocky Mountain House "stood on the left bank of the North Saskatchewan,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  m. above the mouth of the Clearwater r., and 3 m. below Pangman's tree". (NEW LIGHT ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE GREATER NORTHWEST, p.640.) The latter undoubtedly accepted the distance mentioned by Alexander Henry in his journal: "About  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles, or as I measured it, 23 minutes walk on the ice, below the fort, on the S. side, is the entrance of the Clearwater river, 36 yards wide from bank to bank..." Coues, p.702.

on the north side of the Saskatchewan River, presumably to lessen the danger of surprise attack by the warlike Blackfoot tribes from the South. "David Thompson's observations placed this house in lat.  $52^{\circ} 22' 15''$  N., long.  $115^{\circ} 07' 00''$  W. (5)

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(5) Elliott Coues, NEW LIGHT ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE GREATER NORTHWEST, V.2, p.640.

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but Alexander Henry states that it was situated in latitude  $52^{\circ} 22'$  N., longitude  $115^{\circ} 17'$  W. (6)

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(6) Ibid. p.700.

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Alexander Henry the Younger left us the following information concerning this fort's position: "Our establishment stands on a high bank on the N. side of the river; ... This spot was formerly covered with aspen and pine, which have been cut down for the use of the place, leaving a large open space. Frequent fires have aided much in clearing away the wood and brush, so that we now have a grand view of the Rocky Mountains, lying nearly S.W., and apparently running from W.N.W. to nearly S.S.E. Opposite the fort the river is 180 yards wide, while the distance from the bank on which the fort stands to the opposite bank is 250 yds; at high water the whole of this space is covered, and flows with a strong, rapid current. The channel in its ordinary state, as it was





when we arrived last fall, was only 30 yds. wide, and interrupted by a strong rapid where the water rushes among some large stones... This rapid is the first interruption of any kind in approaching the mountains. There are many below this which can not properly be termed rapids, being merely sloping beds of rock and gravel." (7)

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(7) Ibid, p.701.

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Several hundred yards above Mrs. C. Brierley's farm-yard, and closer to the river, there exists a site, now part of a productive field, on which the original fort probably stood, for it corresponds fairly closely with the above description. However, the bank is not as high as one would expect; perhaps erosion and the construction of a road bed along the north side of the river have worn it away to a considerable extent. Although the rapids may have moved over a period of 140 years, they still exist and, like those in 1810, form the first major break in the current above the mouth of the Clearwater. When the virgin soil in this vicinity was turned up sometime in the 1920s, there was some indication that buildings had stood here many years before but unfortunately exact information concerning the remains is no longer available. (8)

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(8) Interview with Russell Brierley, son of the late Chester Brierley who broke this land.

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Different opinions have been expressed in connection with the origin of this post. According to Dr. J.B.Tyrrell, "Rocky Mountain House was built by the North-West Company in 1799 under instructions from John McDonald of Garth, who was



living at that time at Fort George," (9) and Elliott Coues

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(9) J. B. Tyrrell, p.190.

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states that "it was built by John McDonald of Garth in 1802." (10)

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(10) Coues, p.640.

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Morton, in his HISTORY OF THE CANADIAN WEST, does not mention John McDonald of Garth in connection with the founding of the original fort, but asserts that it had been built under the instructions of Angus Shaw shortly before his retirement. (11)

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(11) A.S.Morton, A HISTORY OF THE CANADIAN WEST, London, p.466.

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Duncan M'Gillivray took charge of Rocky Mountain House in the autumn of 1800, using it as a base during his search for a practicable pass through the Rockies. (12)

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(12) Ibid, p.466.

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In the course of his journey from Gordon House to Edmonton House in 1799, James Bird of the Hudson's Bay Company made the following entry in his journal on September 7: "... Met a man who was sent from Buckingham House to inform us that Mr.McDonald of N.W.Co. had arrived there the 5th Inst. & that he intends to build near the Rocky Mountains." (13) James

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(13) H.B.C.Archives, B.60/a/5.

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Bird makes no further reference to John McDonald's plan to build near the mountains in this year, but on September 14 he writes that "some Canadians who went up to build last Summer [1799] after remaining there near a month were reduced to the necessity of returning to this place for want of provisions". (14) It is apparent from Bird's journal that the

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(14) Ibid.

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Hudson's Bay Company was well aware of the North West Company's activities on the upper Saskatchewan, and that both companies



were penetrating this region almost simultaneously.

It was not until 1802 that John McDonald of Garth made his appearance at Rocky Mountain House, succeeding the ailing M'Gillivray as wintering partner in this district. McDonald, who proceeded to enlarge the fort and strengthen its fortifications, was again associated with the post in 1807 while David Thompson was making preparations to cross the Rocky Mountains.

In the autumn of 1810 Alexander Henry the Younger was sent from "Terre Blanche" to take charge of the Mountain House, and as his party approached from the South he noticed that it was well adapted for defence "as the blockhouses commanded the fort for some distance". (15) Smoke was rising

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(15) Coues, P.701.

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from within the stockades and groups of whites (16) and Indians

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(16) Thompson's Columbia brigade had been intercepted at this point by the Piegan.

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were loitering near the gate. In addition to the usual bastions and high stockades "a number of loopholes were made in the shop and garret, bearing directly upon the Indian Hall". This precaution made it possible for the traders, if a quarrel should arise during the bartering, to destroy a large number of Indians before they could leave the building, and the guards in the bastions could fire upon the rest as they retreated toward the gates.

The plan of Rocky Mountain House was probably similar to other trading posts, containing within its rectangular palisade living quarters for men and officers, a kitchen, a blacksmith shop, storerooms for furs and provisions, and a





trading shop adjoining a long Indian Hall. (17) These build-

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(17) There are no dimensions available for Rocky Mountain House buildings, but the Indian Hall built at lower White Earth House under Henry's instructions was 70' x 20'. (Coues, p.616). This post, also called New White Earth House or lower Terre Blanche, was situated at the mouth of White Mud Creek, and it was from this fort that Alexander Henry travelled overland to Rocky Mountain House in the autumn of 1810.

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ings were constructed from local spruce and pine. Logs of appropriate lengths were prepared with axe and adze, while square beams and crude boards were manufactured by means of a large "whip saw" operated by two men, one standing in a pit and the other on ground level. Local clay was used to fill the chinks in the walls, and roofs were daubed with gum and then covered with mud and pine bark until not a drop of rain penetrated them.

Henry immediately set his unwilling men to renovating the whole establishment which, as usual, had fallen into a state of disrepair during its abandonment. "The rotten old coverings of the houses" had to be torn off and replaced, decaying buildings had to be repaired and new ones built. Planks also had to be sawn so that the gates of the palisade could be mended. All the men, including Henry himself, lived in tents while the houses were being completed. By the middle of November the third and last house was finished, and after the accumulation of "chips, wood, dirt and snow" had been cleared off the floors, the men for the first time since their arrival in early October felt the security of a solid roof above them. The fort gates were finished by the beginning of December and the bastions had also been put in some order, though in Henry's critical opinion "they were wretched buildings for defence".





He complained also of the chimneys, every one of which smoked, rendering the houses hardly less uncomfortable than the tents.

Acton House, which was also frequently referred to as Mountain House, was a competitive post situated close to the North West fort. This post was probably given its original name in honour of its founder James Bird, who was a native of Acton in the County of Middlesex. Actually little information is available concerning the establishment itself, as there are no records for Acton House, but the Edmonton journals refer to it frequently.

James Bird arrived at Fort Edmonton from Gordon House on September 8, 1799, and his journal contains a number of references to the preparations which preceded the founding of Acton House, as well as to the activities of the Canadians:

- Sept.11 "... Sixteen men getting ready to go off in one Boat & Canoe to Build near the Stoney Mountain..."
- Sept.12 "... Sent off 4 men in a canoe to accompany the Canadians to where they are going to build near the Stonney (sic) Mountain..."
- Sept.13 "... at 8A.M. nine men embarked in a boat loaded with 30 pieces of Trading goods to proceed up the river to Where the Canadians intend building near the Stoney Mountain." (18)

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(18) H.B.C.Archives, B.60/a/5.

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Finally James Bird himself set off in the afternoon of September 14 toward the Rocky Mountains with six men and a number of horses, in company with a party of Northwesters. Apparently they travelled overland in a southerly direction until they were in sight of the banks of the Red Deer River, and then went west until "the snowy Summits of the Stoney Mountain like vast heaps of white Clouds appeared in view." On September 24 James Bird writes: "... at 7A.M. we set off



and at 9 arrived at the side of the Saskatchewan river, rode across and encamped near the place where we intend building..."

By the beginning of October the construction of Acton House was under way. James Bird, however, did not remain long enough to see much of the fort completed, for on October 5 he makes the following entry in his journal: "Employed getting ready to return to Edmonton House as my presence seems to be no longer necessary here, the amazing bad accounts we had received of this place both from Indians & Canadians occasioned my coming up in case any difficulties should have taken place..."(19) Two days later Bird "embarked with three

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(19) Ibid.

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men & an Indian in a Canoe for Edmonton House", and it appears that he was never again in charge of the post.

Trading during the winter season must have been satisfactory, for on May 14, 1800, "Gilbert Laughton and nine men in a boat & two parchment Canoes carrying 46 bundles of Furs and eight bags of pemmican arrived at Edmonton from Acton House after a tedious passage of nine days owing to the amazing shallowness of the water ..." (20)

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(20) Ibid.

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Alexander Flett took charge of the new post in the summer of 1800, but it is evident from the lists in the York Factory account books that Acton House was not operated from 1802 to 1805. In the latter year John Peter Pruden took charge of this fort and kept it in operation, in spite of the hostile Blackfoot, for two years.



James Bird arrived at Edmonton House from Oxford House on September 22, 1806, to "hear of fresh massacres among the Indians & even that an attack on Acton House was threatened..." Two men and an Indian were immediately instructed to visit the fort to discover whether its people needed any assistance. They arrived back on October 3 "with the agreeable intelligence that Mr.Pruden and his men were all well and everything safe", though seventy Blackfoot Indians had been at the post, and in such an unfriendly mood that "Mr.Pruden was under the necessity of Trading articles from them of little value and paying them better than he would have done under other circumstances". (21)

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(21) H.B.C.Archives, B.60/a/6.

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Acting upon instructions from James Bird, J.P.Pruden remained there during the summer of 1807 until he had gathered the furs from the Indians who were in the habit of taking their catch to that place. He then abandoned Acton House and retired to the "North Branch" (22) to push forward the

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(22) "North Branch" refers to a post established by the Hudson's Bay Company at the mouth of the Brazeau River in 1807.

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building, attend to the Indians and acquire some knowledge of that part of the country. It appears that "North Branch" was the only Hudson's Bay post that was operating above Edmonton House during the outfit of 1807-1808.

Acton House remained closed during the next two years but there is evidence that it was again opened in the winter of 1810-11, for Alexander Henry mentions that the







"H.B. people" had come "to winter alongside of" him and the following entry in the Edmonton journal confirms its re-establishment:

1810, Nov. 1: "Sent off Mr. Macfarlane with one man for Acton House (which it has been found necessary for the season to resettle) to assist Wm. Flett who is in charge of that place and to give him every instruction the new system (23) of conducting the trade requires..."

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(23) "The reorganization of the Hudson's Bay Company under the guidance of Lord Selkirk's brother-in-law, Andrew Wedderburn (Colville)." A. S. Morton, p.422.

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Though the trade was not always gratifying, the post was retained until 1813, principally to accommodate the Piegan. By keeping the Piegan chiefs in a friendly mood during the spring and summer of 1811, William Flett and his men had done much to assure the safe return of Joseph Howse who had been trading in the country of the Flathead Indians.

In the summer of 1819 the Hudson's Bay Company reluctantly reopened Acton House to satisfy the Muddy River Indians whom the Northwesters were endeavouring to woo by building a post on the west side of the Rocky Mountains near their territory. (24) During the ensuing season the beaver

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(24) H.B.C. Archives, B.60/a/18.

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trade remained good, though the quantity of other furs had greatly diminished, and it was decided to keep Acton House in operation through the winter of 1820-21. But with rumours of coalition in the air, it is likely that competition between the two mountain posts had by this time lost much of its original vigour.

The first descriptive account of Rocky Mountain House after the Union of 1821 was left by Paul Kane, who visited it



in 1848 during his wanderings through the North-West. He also painted an interesting picture of an Assiniboine Camp with the outline of the fort visible in the background. Impressed by the appearance of the establishment, the artist wrote: "This fort is beautifully situated on the banks of the Saskatchewan in a small prairie, backed by the Rocky Mountains in the distance... It is built like most of the other forts, of wood, but with more than ordinary regard to strength, which is thought necessary on account of the vicious disposition of the Blackfoot tribe..."(25)

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(25) Paul Kane, WANDERINGS OF AN ARTIST (London:1859; Toronto, 1925) p.287.

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In the winter of 1854-55 Henry John Moberly was in charge of Rocky Mountain House, and his reminiscent account again stresses the formidable aspect of the fort: "Mountain House was surrounded by the usual 28 foot (26) pickets, with

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(26) Pickets were usually less than "28 foot" high. This may be a typographical error.

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a block bastion at each corner and a gallery running all around inside about four and a half feet from the top, each bastion containing a supply of flintlocks and ammunition. Within was a square formed by the officers' houses, men's houses, stores and general trading shops, a square between this and the pickets for boat-building, with forges and carpenter-shops, another square for horses and a fourth for general purposes.

"There were two gates, the main gate on the north and a smaller one on the south side leading through a narrow



passage the height of the stockade into a long hall. In this hall, amid speech-making, the Indians were received, the calumet passed and two glasses of rum of medium strength were given to each Indian. They were then turned out and the gates closed against them, the only means of communication being through two port-holes some twenty inches square opening through the stockade into a small blockhouse through which the trade in rum was conducted." (27)

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(27) H.J.Moberly and W.B.Cameron, WHEN FUR WAS KING (London: Dent, 1929) Chap.VIII, p.34-35.

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Three years later Dr. Hector of the Palliser Expedition arrived at the same place, which by that time was in a very ruinous condition. Though primarily interested in the geological formation of the area, he made various references to the fort itself, describing it in the following terms: "It is a roughly constructed group of log huts, consisting of a dwelling house, stores, and workshops, and all surrounded by a palisade. The woodwork is very old and rotten, and the whole place is tumbling to pieces..." (28)

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(28) Journals, Detailed Reports, and Observations Relative to the Exploration by Captain Palliser, of that Portion of British North America ... (London 1863) pp.62-63.

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According to the observations of Dr. Hector this post stood on the north bank of the river, which was 150 yards wide at this point, and about half a mile above the Clearwater River in latitude 52° 29' N and longitude 115° 2' W. (29)

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(29) Papers Relative to the Exploration by Captain Palliser of that portion of British America ... (London, 1859) p.25.

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Three years after Dr. Hector's visit, the difficulties involved in procuring provisions and dealing with the Blackfoot





Indians made it impossible to maintain the post any longer, and Mr. Brazeau, who had been in charge of Rocky Mountain House since the fall of 1855, retired to Fort Edmonton with his staff early in the spring of 1861.

In 1930 the late Chester Brierley ploughed up the remains of a trading post several hundred yards below the cairn and on the same side of the Saskatchewan River. Nails, spikes, large hinges and chimney stones were unearthed, and the presence of charred logs led Mr. Brierley to conclude that the buildings had been destroyed by fire. (30) It is

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(30) Interview with Russell Brierley, Ferrier, Alberta.

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possible that an unrecorded establishment once stood here, but the place marked by the stones which still lie in the field corresponds closely to the site described by Dr. Hector in 1858.

In 1864 the Hudson's Bay Company was once more making arrangements preparatory to the reopening of the post, and early in the new year Mr. Hardisty and a party set off for Rocky Mountain House. "Pacquette & Wm. McLeod, Carpenters, were sent up with Mr. Hardisty to build the New Fort at the Mountains..." This last establishment appears to have been situated less than a quarter of a mile above the older fort which was inhabited while the new buildings were under construction. It is not known when the traders moved into their new quarters, but the carpenters were still working on them in 1867. (31)

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(31) H.B.C. Archives, B.184/2/5.

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Captain Butler visited Rocky Mountain House in 1870 while commissioned by Governor Archibald of Manitoba "to establish some civil authority in this western district, and to enquire into the cause and extent of the epidemic of small-pox among the Indians."

The fort then stood in a level meadow which was cleared of trees although dense forest lay around it for some distance. In his interesting account of the area Butler writes: "The Mountain House is perhaps the most singular specimen of an Indian trading post to be found in the wide territory of the Hudson's Bay Company. Every precaution known to the trader has been put into force to prevent the possibility of surprise during 'a trade'. Bars and bolts and places to fire down at the Indians who are trading abound in every direction: so dreaded is the name borne by the Blackfeet." (32)

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(32) William F. Butler, THE GREAT LONE LAND (London: 1873)p.281.

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In January, 1872, the same post was visited by Deputy Surveyor W. S. Gore during the course of his survey of Hudson's Bay Reserves in the North West Territories. In a letter to Donald A. Smith, dated November 25, 1873, Gore left the following laconic description of the Company's property:

"500 acres fronting on the north bank of the Saskatchewan River. Valueless for farming purposes being a mossy swamp covered with Spruce and Tamarac, however, as at Pigeon Lake a few acres surrounding the Fort are good. The Fort is new and substantially built but there is very little trading done there now the "Blackfeet" are finding a market nearer their hunting grounds." (33)

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(33) H.B.C.Archives, E.15/13.

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Finally in 1875 Rocky Mountain House was permanently abandoned. Correspondence between Richard Hardisty at Edmonton and Commissioner James A. Grahame at Fort Garry reveals that they were discussing the possibility of rafting at least one of the buildings down the Saskatchewan River to Fort Pitt, providing the cost of transport "would not exceed \$200.00", but it is not known whether this difficult project was ever carried out.

With the departure of the fur traders the fort was left to the whims of the Indians who may have been responsible for the fire which demolished the greater part of the establishment in 1882. J.B.Tyrrell (34) visited the site in 1886

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(34) Dr.Tyrrell was mistaken in his belief that the post he photographed in 1886 was the original fort, and this error is retained in the inscription on the cairn. p.88.

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and his photographs of the ruins indicate that only four chimneys, two bastions, and one building were standing at that time. (35)

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(35) Tyrrell, DAVID THOMPSON'S NARRATIVE, p.88.

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Enough of it remained, however, to remind the pioneers of the twentieth century that a different kind of frontier movement had preceded the arrival of the homesteaders. This vestige of the fur trading era gave the newcomers a feeling of continuity with the past, which they were proud to acknowledge and determined to preserve. The local newspaper reminded its subscribers of the historical background of their region; the Pioneer Society held annual picnics in the shadow of the two remaining chimneys, and the citizens of the growing village insisted on retaining the name "Rocky





Mountain House", instead of accepting "Lochearn" which certain railway officials had tried to foist upon them.

As the years passed it became apparent that the old fort would disappear altogether, unless someone assumed responsibility for its preservation. Displaying characteristic interest in the history of their community, the village council and the local branch of "The Native Sons of Canada" solicited the aid of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, which eventually provided for the erection of a cairn dedicated to those resourceful traders who had been associated with Rocky Mountain House.

On a pleasant November afternoon in 1931 a large body of citizens, in company with the Honourable J. E. Brownlee, Alfred Speakman, member of Parliament for Red Deer, Mr. D. Duggan Conservative leader in the Alberta Legislature, and certain other visitors, gathered before the chimneys to witness the unveiling ceremony. Rev. C.E.Reeve, pastor of the local Anglican Church, presented a brief account of the post's history, at the conclusion of which Premier Brownlee made several fitting remarks and then, attended by Mayor Kirby, unveiled the cairn.

The chimneys, however, remained in a ruinous state for eight years after the dedication, and no effort was made to renovate them until Mr.Kirby, the postmaster in Rocky Mountain House, undertook to bring the matter before the proper authorities at Ottawa. When the Hon. James A.MacKinnon visited the town in the autumn of 1938, Mr.Kirby showed him



the ruins of the Hudson's Bay Fort and urged that they be preserved. In the winter of 1939 Mr.Kirby appealed directly to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board through one of its prominent members, Mr.Justice Howay of New Westminster, B.C., and money was immediately made available for the renovation of the chimneys. On September 13 of the same year an interested group of men, consisting of Judge Howay, Mr.C.H.Snell of Red Deer, W.E.Payne, K.C., and a representative of a Vancouver newspaper, arrived in Rocky Mountain House to inspect the work that was being done on the old Hudson's Bay fort. (36) Mrs. C. Brierley also made a substantial contribution to the project by donating to the Board sufficient land to include both the cairn and the chimneys. A sturdy iron fence now encloses this interesting plot, and visitors may enter the grounds through a turnstile gate. The people of the Rocky Mountain House area are justly proud of their historic landmark which is the only fort site in Alberta with chimneys still standing.

(36) "Mountaineer", Rocky Mountain House, Sept.13, 1939.

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THE LAST FORT



This cairn, dedicated to David Thompson, was erected in 1931 by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board.



Only two chimneys remain of the formidable establishment which was abandoned in 1875.





## CHAPTER THREE

### LIFE AT THE FORTS

Trading was the paramount activity at all posts, but if an establishment were to have any degree of permanence, the officer in charge and his men had to be concerned about such matters as maintenance, defence and the procuring of food. Details of such activities at the first Rocky Mountain House may be gleaned from the journals of Thompson and Alexander Henry, the narrative of the latter being especially rich in personal observations.

While waiting for an opportunity to send off the Columbia brigade, Henry bartered with suspicious Piegan for "what trifles they had". One band possessed a buffalo hide of peculiar colouring: "the hair on the back was dirty white, the long hair under the throat and fore legs iron gray, and the sides of the belly were yellow." They were also the proud owners of a diminutive cream-coloured stallion, "three feet seven inches high, and four feet four inches from ear to tail". This extraordinary creature, with its white mane and tail, must have caught the superstitious fancy of the Indians, for Henry was unsuccessful in his bargaining.

He ruled the natives with a strong hand, rightly convinced that firmness was the best policy in dealing with the restive Piegan whose constant fear was that the white men would supply their western enemies with arms and ammunition. His position was further complicated by their insistent demands for drink. The Indians of this region had already



acquired a craving for the traders' diluted rum, and they were always ready to engage in "a drinking match". On more than one occasion, Henry expressed chagrin over the indiscriminate use of alcohol, which was steadily driving the natives to debauchery and laziness. Yet, while deprecating the evil effects of rum on the once noble red man, he was not prepared to abandon its use entirely as David Thompson had done. (1) When a letter from "Terre Blanche" brought

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(1) Douglas MacKay, THE HONOURABLE COMPANY, (Edinburgh University Press, 1937) p.243.

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news of "the Act of Parliament prohibiting spiritous liquors among the Indians", Henry remarked with some concern that "this law may ease the trader, but will not enrich him." (2)

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(2) Coues, p.663.

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However, since there was no police organization to enforce it, this measure had little effect on the liquor trade.

After Thompson and his men had at last departed in search of a new route through the mountains, affairs at the fort returned to normal. The journal entry for November 20, 1810, described the routine of an ordinary day: "Desjarlaix hunting; seven men out to raise dog trains; four laying up canoes and cleaning the fort; one making a wood train; one off for meat, one cutting wood, one carting, one making kegs. Our canoes are much split by the frost, and four large axes broke to-day, being nearly as brittle as glass. Desjarlaix killed nothing, as the animals about the fort have all been roused by men going for trains, searching for horses, etc." (3)

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(3) Ibid, p.665.

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All hands not required for the hunt or other special tasks were employed in repairing the "rotten old buildings". An energetic worker himself, Alexander Henry could not tolerate idleness, and he became extremely impatient with the indolent fellows who were proceeding so slowly with the necessary repairs.

Though the struggle for furs and survival in an austere environment left little leisure time, the usual activity around the fort was interrupted to celebrate Christmas Day and the New Year. The type of entertainment was as crude as the primitive surroundings. The men danced as well as they could with the Indian women and the event usually ended in an orgy of drinking. On January 1, 1811, Henry wrote: "A dance at our house in the evening, which did not break up until two o'clock, when I gave our people a treat of liquor, one pint per man and they began to drink." (4) No work was

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(4) Ibid, p.667.

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done on the morrow as "the men were drunk all day and went to sleep".

It is not clear whether any men from Acton House were present on this occasion to enjoy the merry-making, but the people of the two posts had kept Christmas together. They seem to have been on the best of terms even though the intensity of the struggle between their great companies was steadily increasing. They carried mail for each other to and from "Terre Blanche", Edmonton and Fort Augustus, occasionally shared provisions and sometimes hunted together. On December 1, 1810, Henry wrote, "The H.B. hunters passed up on the S. side to join ours at Jolies Prairies", and on another occasion





remarked, "Our hunters are tented near Meadow river with La Corneille, the H.B.Co. hunter." Perhaps the consciousness of their common insecurity in a remote area, where natives were not always friendly, nor food supply constant, inspired this neighbourliness which was a pleasant departure from the violence and ill-will that frequently occurred in other parts of the North-West during the same period.

After the union of the two companies, Rocky Mountain House was not kept open during the summer as the volume of trade was then very small, but in the fall of the year, when the trading season had been inaugurated by the arrival of the York Factory brigade, the Rocky Mountain House "outfit" would leave Fort Edmonton to spend another winter on the upper Saskatchewan. In the Rocky Mountain journal for 1830-31, Henry Fisher records such a departure and gives an account of his outward trip.

The party, consisting of twelve men with twenty-three horses to carry supplies, left Edmonton on September 18, 1830, and following fairly closely the route taken by David Thompson in the early spring of 1800, and by Alexander Henry in September, 1810, it struck overland to the Battle River, in the vicinity of Ponoka. The brigade then bore south-west, passing the heavily wooded area on the east shore of Gull Lake, until it reached the Medicine River where the route turned due west toward the mouth of the Clearwater. Owing to the burden of winter provisions and the difficult terrain, the journey was slow and interrupted by frequent encampments. After twelve days of tedious travelling, Henry Fisher and his men



at last "got across the Saskatchewan River and immediately began to repair their fort." (5)

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(5) Rocky Mountain House journal, 1830-31, H.B.C.Archives. Since the fort was situated on the north side of the river, it would appear that Fisher, like Henry in 1810, approached Rocky Mountain House from the south, apparently crossing the Clearwater near its mouth.

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During the two previous trading seasons Fisher's men had made many repairs, including renovation of the bastions and gates and the erection of a number of new store houses. Yet so rapid was the deterioration of the establishment while unoccupied that an extensive building program had to be carried out in the winter of 1830-31. On the morning after their arrival "three men were working at the New House and eight at the trading shop", and several days later "two men were chopping logs for the new house, five covering it with Hay and earth, two planing Boards." (6) The Hudson's Bay

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(6) Rocky Mountain House journal, 1830-31, H.B.C.Archives, London, B,184a/3.

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men soon put their house in order, and though repairs were similar to those carried on by Henry for the North West Company in 1810, Fisher did not find it necessary to complain about the indolence or carelessness of his men.

It was essential that the buildings be adequately restored in order to protect the inhabitants from the severity of winter weather, and the stockade and bastions had to be strong enough to discourage Indian attack. Major repairs, however, were usually completed within a few weeks after arrival, and maintenance then became a secondary concern. The difficult problem of gathering provisions, on the other



hand, was persistent, and when game was scarce in the mountain area, the search for food would even temporarily supersede fur trading. The brigade took with it a supply of such dry provisions as flour, sugar, tea, rice, raisins, and spices, but these stores were carefully rationed as they had to be brought by boat all the way from York Factory or the Red River Settlement. Some posts like Fort Edmonton raised their own vegetables in local gardens, but at Rocky Mountain House, which was abandoned in summer and where early frosts prevented successful gardening in any case, meat was the only food that could be procured locally. According to the reminiscences of Henry J. Moberley, the daily ration was "eight pounds of fresh meat,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  pounds of Pemmican, or three of dried meat, to each man" and "train dogs were fed two fish or four pounds of fresh meat daily." Each woman attached to the fort received one half of the male allowance and each child a quarter. (7)

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(7) Henry J. Moberley & William B. Cameron, WHEN FUR WAS KING, (London: Dent, 1929) p.83.

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There is no record to indicate whether this generous ration was adhered to at Rocky Mountain House, but during the winter large quantities of fresh meat were brought into the fort. On January 21, 1837, Chief Trader Harriott made the following entry: "Fine clear weather, the three men sent to the half breed hunters on the 16th arrived with 4300 lbs of meat. They inform us that there is about the same quantity of meat remaining on a Scaffold but the Horses are so much reduced carrying meat on their backs all winter that they are unable to return, as there is no snow it cannot be got







home with dogs. The Stone Indian Hunters are pitched on the Bank of the River which enables us to get the meat they collect with sleds." Earlier in the same month the fort had procured "10,000 lbs. of meat" from the Stoney Indians and halfbreed hunters, and this large reserve was stored in the new ice house. (8)

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(8) Rocky Mountain House journal, 1837-38, H.B.C. Archives, London.

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The traders at Rocky Mountain House endeavoured to keep a large store of meat on hand, for the buffalo was a migratory animal and years of hunting had gradually reduced the quantity of other game, both large and small, which had once been so plentiful in the neighbourhood of the fort. To guard against future want, therefore, the man in charge grasped every opportunity to augment his meat supplies, even when the provision book showed a large reserve. The fort's own hunters were constantly on the alert for fresh game, but dried buffalo meat, grease and pemmican were usually obtained from the Indians, whose womenfolk were skilled in the various processes of meat preservation. In the fall of 1854 H. J. Moberley used generous quantities of rum to negotiate such a trade with the Blackfoot near the fort, for Chief Factor Sinclair at Fort Edmonton had warned him "that provisions were likely to be short that year in the North." (9)

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(9) WHEN FUR WAS KING, p.37.

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Surplus dried meat and pemmican, being less perishable and more easily carried than fresh meat, could be transported to Edmonton without too much difficulty, and from there distributed to needy posts.



The people at the Mountain House depended heavily upon Indian supplies during the winter season, for often the Company hunters were unable to keep them adequately stocked with fresh meat owing to the poor state of their horses and the deepness of the snow. In the winter of 1861 the Blackfoot refused to bring either provisions or furs to the post, and there was consequently such a scarcity of food that Mr. Brazeau and his people were in real danger of starvation. Fifty horses had died at Rocky Mountain House and since the buffalo were very far off and the men had too few animals with which to haul meat, "they had no alternative but to leave the Fort." (10)

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(10) Edmonton journal, March 28, 1861, H.B.C. Archives, London.

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Again, on August 27, 1864, the Edmonton journal makes reference to starvation at Rocky Mountain House: "Abraham Salois with a whole party of poor starving people arrived this morning from R.M. House; received a letter from Mr. Brazeau in which he says they have not got a mouthful of provisions at the place, and begs hard for a small supply from here." In 1866 the fort was kept open in the summer, and because game was scarce, men, women and children experienced serious privations until October 16 "when 40 carts and a wagon containing the outfit for the mountain arrived in the forenoon." (11) During the month of August "all hands

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(11) Rocky Mountain House journal, John Sinclair, 1866-68, B.184a/5, H.B.C. Archives, London.

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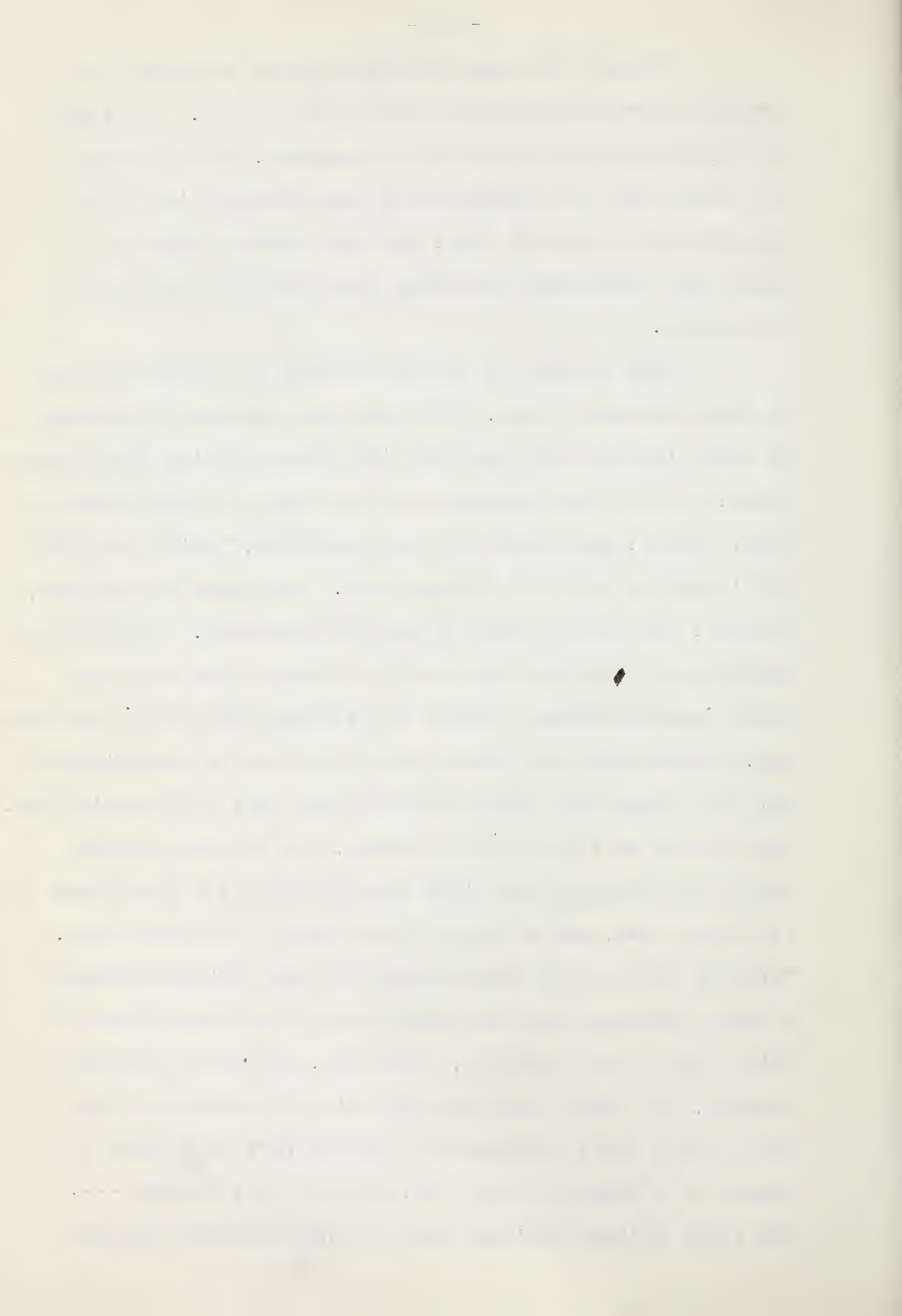
set snares for rabbits to keep themselves alive", for they did not have "a single load of ammunition".



Usually food was plentiful enough to enable the traders to remain throughout the winter season. The trade was conducted with considerable formality, for the chiefs and their bands felt honoured by the ceremony with which the white men received them, and the traders themselves found that consistent procedure simplified the problem of discipline.

When a party of Indians arrived on a trading visit to Rocky Mountain House, their camp was customarily pitched at some distance from the fort "and braves having piled their robes, leather and provisions on the backs of their wives or their horses, approached in long cavalcade," while the officer in charge went out to meet them. The gates of the fort, however, were kept closed in case of treachery. In 1870 Captain Butler described the trading routine as he saw it at Rocky Mountain House: "While the Indians make ready for trading, preparations are completed in the fort -- communication cut off between the Indian room and the rest of the buildings, guns placed up in the loft overhead, and the men all get ready for anything that might turn up; then the outer gate is thrown open, and a large throng enters the Indian room. Three or four of the first-comers are now admitted through a narrow passage into the trading shop from the shelves of which most of the blankets, red cloth, and beads have been removed, for the red man brought into the presence of so much finery would unfortunately behave very much after the manner of a hungry boy put near candies on a counter ---. The first Indians admitted hand in their peltries through







a wooden grating, and receive in exchange so many blankets, beads or strands. Out they go to the large hall where their comrades are anxiously awaiting their turn, and in rush another batch, and the doors are locked again. The reappearance of the fortunate braves with the much-coveted articles of finery adds greatly to the excitement. This procedure continues until all the peltries are sold, or --- until all trading goods are exhausted." (12)

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(12) William F. Butler, THE GREAT LONE LAND (London: Burns and Oates, 1907) p.284.

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Trade usually went on without incident, but precautions were seldom relaxed, for the behaviour of the Indian was unpredictable, especially when trading goods were scarce or if the natives had insufficient peltries to purchase the amount of goods they desired. The unit of trade was one beaver skin, usually designated as "made-beaver", and every other skin or article was evaluated according to this standard.

Though the Hudson's Bay Company preferred to reduce the use of alcohol as much as possible, Jamaica rum continued to be an important factor in Rocky Mountain House trade, because of stiff competition from the Americans who traded freely in their own brand of liquor which they called whisky. Apparently it was customary to treat industrious Indians upon their arrival at the fort, for on Nov.3, 1836, Harriott wrote: "An old Stone Indian with his family arrived and as they have made tolerably good hunts they received a present of nine gallon keg of mixed rum." (13) There is no evidence

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(13) Rocky Mountain journal, 1836-37, H.B.C.Archives, London.

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in the Rocky Mountain House journals to prove that spirits were exchanged for furs and provisions, but Henry Moberly admits such practice while the post was under his charge.

"Dried and pounded meat, cakes and bladders of grease, buffalo hides, dressed leather, wolf skins and other things were taken in exchange for rum, and in a short time the effects were plainly visible. Horses were often pledged for rum and were always duly delivered after the drinking was over. The rum, being 33 percent over proof, went a long way when mixed liberally with Saskatchewan water. After the first two glasses the rum was diluted -- one of rum to seven of water -- and for this mixture a stiff price was obtained in "made beaver", the currency of the country; dollars and cents or pounds, shillings and pence were unheard of." (14)

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(14) WHEN FUR WAS KING, p.34.

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Besides the gathering of furs and provisions, there were other important, though less urgent, industries carried on at the fort, and among these the smith's trade held an honoured place. With the aid of his crude forge, stoked with local coal and charcoal, and fanned with an improvised bellows, the 'smithy' made many of the tools required around the fort. During periods of extensive repairs or building he was particularly busy, for large quantities of nails and spikes were then needed as well as hinges, locks and other iron parts. On May 5, 1864, it is recorded that the blacksmith had "finished 1000 spikes" for the stockades of the fort alone, and many more were required in the course of the building. Some of these nails and spikes can still be found on the road which



lies between the cairn and the crumbling river bank.

Like Fort Edmonton, Rocky Mountain House was a boat-building depot, for here there was an abundance of fine white spruce and the boats, when finished, could easily be taken down the Saskatchewan. Again the smith found a good use for his trade, as the carpenters needed certain iron parts for their York boats. Evidently this industry at Rocky Mountain House was a considerable asset to the Hudson's Bay Company. Palliser reported in 1858 that "13 fine Mackmaw (York) boats were turned out before the 1st of May, about 35 feet long and capable of carrying 75 Pieces of 90 lb. each." (15)

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(15) Freeda Fleming, "Rocky Mountain House" (THE BEAVER, December, 1949) P.53.

If Palliser is correct in his estimation, the above boats were not constructed according to usual specifications. York boats were commonly built in two sizes, one 28 feet long, and a larger type, 40 feet by 10 feet. See HONOURABLE COMPANY, p.274, and "CANADIAN VOYAGEURS" by S.C.Ells, Geographical Journal, Feb., 1951, p.85.

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When trading had been finished and the river was free of ice, usually late in April or early in May, the fur traders prepared to abandon the fort, packing furs, provisions and equipment in their large boats. Though little could be done to protect the buildings from the vandalism of the natives, the doors at least were "carried into the woods so that the Indians might not take the nails out of them." (16)

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(16) Rocky Mountain House journal, 1828-29 (Henry Fisher) B.184a, H.B.C.Archives, London.

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The fall 'outfit' travelled to Rocky Mountain House with horses, as the boats could proceed upstream with only half cargoes owing to the swiftness of the current above







Edmonton, (17) but the return trip in the spring was less

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(17) Report on Saskatchewan District by Colin Robertson,  
July 20, 1823, H.B.C.Archives, London.

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arduous. When Henry Moberly left the post in 1855, he had a brigade of eight boats, six of them built at the fort, which passed downstream carrying a heavy cargo of 2500 buffalo robes, several tons of dried meat and grease, over 300 cured buffalo tongues, 600 wolf skins and a variety of other furs. "The horses, numbering about two hundred, taken principally in trade during the winter, were sent overland." His party "never camped twice consecutively on the same side of the river, and preferred, when possible, an island as a precaution against a sudden raid from some strong war party." (18)

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(18) WHEN FUR WAS KING, p.45.

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Yet, in spite of such danger, the Mountain men must have looked forward to the spring journey with a certain degree of elation. Though dances and "drinking matches" enlivened Christmas and New Year at Rocky Mountain House, the larger society of Fort Edmonton was a welcome relief from the trying existence at the forks where food was often meagre, and the mood of the Indians a constant worry.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE BEFORE THE UNION OF 1821

The recorded history of the Rocky Mountain House area began in 1754 when the Hudson's Bay Company, having resolved to meet the competition of French traders in the interior, (1) sent Anthony Henday into the distant land of

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(1) Morton, p.244.

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the Blackfoot Indians. His journal tells us that he wandered close to where the Clearwater River meets the North Saskatchewan and he was undoubtedly the first white man to look upon the mountains from this region. Before returning to York Factory, Henday and his Indians spent several months in the country east of the forks, hunting the beaver which abounded in the rivers and streams.

Peter Pangman, representing the North West Company, was the next white man known to have entered the same territory. He travelled farther west than Henday, passing at least three miles beyond the confluence of the two rivers. Upon sighting the Rocky Mountains he inscribed his name and the year "1790" on the bark of a sturdy pine which was henceforth known as Pangman's Pine. Though no post was built then, this tree marked the westernmost penetration at that time, and was an indication of the quickening race for furs.

Several months before the establishment of Rocky Mountain House, Hudson's Bay men and Northwesters had been visiting the region of the upper Saskatchewan to trade with the natives there, but competition for furs became much



more intense when each company built a fort near the mouth of the Clearwater in the autumn of 1799. Both parties hoped to monopolize the trade of the Blackfoot tribes, and of any Indians who would venture across the mountains.

Meanwhile the energetic North West Company was formulating a bolder plan in which Rocky Mountain House, it was thought, would play an important part. Duncan M'Gillivray, one of those partners who had been deeply impressed by Alexander Mackenzie's "enlarged views", began to look upon the Mountain post as a springboard for invading the prolific furbearing region of the Pacific Coast. Hoping to win over the Hudson's Bay Company, he envisaged a single trading organization that would span British North America and even enter into trade with the Orient. In keeping with this grand scheme, Duncan M'Gillivray appeared at Rocky Mountain House in the autumn of 1800 to search out a suitable water route over which brigades could transport supplies to the region of the Columbia and also return with furs by way of the North Saskatchewan headwaters.

In spite of poor health he made two preliminary voyages to the Rocky Mountains in that same year, but the arduous task of crossing the barrier was delegated to James Hughes, a partner, and David Thompson, a clerk who was establishing his reputation as a surveyor and explorer. The first effort failed owing to rough terrain and the flooded condition of the Sheep River, an upper tributary of the North Saskatchewan, but there is some reason to believe that, in the summer of 1801,





Duncan M'Gillivray himself succeeded in reaching Kootenay Lake by way of White Man's Pass. (2) Nevertheless, when M'Gillivray

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(2) Morton, A HISTORY OF THE CANADIAN WEST, p.467.

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returned to eastern headquarters to enter the firm of McTavish, Frobisher & Company, (3) he was not yet able to report that a

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(3) Morton, p.344; "After the death of Benjamin Frobisher, on April 15, 1787, McTavish & Co. united with Joseph Frobisher & Co. (November, 1787). This firm was gradually able to secure to itself the right to supply all goods required by the North West Company." In 1802 Duncan McGillivray became the representative of the McTavish, Frobisher & Co. travelling up to Fort William to meet the winterers at the annual meeting of the North West Company.

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practicable route had been discovered.

Five years later the North West Company, now rid of its costly struggle with the X.Y.Company, resolved once more to seize the Columbia region for itself. Accordingly, while Simon Fraser was engaged in crossing the mountains from the Peace River, (4) David Thompson was instructed to cross them

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(4) Morton, p.480.

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by ascending the North Saskatchewan. He spent the winter of 1806-07 making preparations for the spring expedition, and John McDonald of Garth, then in charge at Fort de l'Isle on the North Saskatchewan, came up on two occasions to assist. (5)

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(5) Tyrrell, Introduction, p.49, and H.B.C.Archives, B.60/a/6.

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The arrangements had to be carried out with the utmost secrecy so that the watchful John P. Pruden at Acton House would not divine their plans, and, above all to escape the attention of the jealous Piegan who were determined to prevent all white men from establishing trading relations with their enemies beyond the mountains.



The story of Thompson's crossing of the Rocky Mountains is almost as well known as Mackenzie's amazing dash to the Pacific in 1793. On May 10, 1807, accompanied by his half-breed wife and children, he set forth on the historic journey up the Saskatchewan, following a route which he knew the Kootenay Indians had used some years before. By good fortune the main Piegan band had recently gone on the warpath further to the South. Thompson's journal refers to this coincidence which contributed much to his success: "The murder of two Peagan Indians by Captain Lewis of the United States, drew the Peagans to the Missouri to revenge their deaths; and thus gave me an opportunity to cross the Mountains by the defiles of the Saskatchewan River, which led to the headwaters of the Columbia River". (6)

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(6) David Thompson's Narrative, p.375.

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At the northern end of Lake Windermere, he built Kootenay House near the mouth of Toby Creek, and commenced trading with the Kootenay and Flathead Indians whose furs were taken out by the new Saskatchewan route past Rocky Mountain House. The Columbia enterprise was as last underway. The achievement of this much of his great ambition must have given the dying M'Gillivray considerable satisfaction, even though he had failed to secure the cooperation of the Hudson's Bay Company.

David Thompson built several other houses across the mountains, and for a number of years fur brigades travelled back and forth on the great Saskatchewan waterway. The Piegan, meanwhile, were becoming increasingly restless and after suf-



fering a severe defeat at the hands of the Flathead, they decided to stop the flow of arms and supplies to their inveterate enemies. When Alexander Henry arrived at Rocky Mountain House on October 5, 1810, he found that the Columbia brigade had been forced to retire to this point because the Piegan stood between them and the mountains. Henry, who had come to look after the usual trading and administrative business at the fort, now found himself in a rather precarious situation. Without arousing the suspicions of the Indians, he must endeavour to send the Columbia men on their way, as he was convinced that David Thompson was on the Kootenay Plains waiting for supplies.

The constant traffic of Indian parties had prevented him from launching the Columbia canoes until October 11, when Big Bear and his Piegan band set out on a buffalo hunt, and no other redskins were in sight. The canoes were immediately put into the water, but before the men could embark, the Hudson's Bay outfit from Fort Edmonton suddenly appeared on the beach below. Apparently Henry's ingenuity was equal to such emergencies, for in his journal he writes: "... my only resource was to put the baggage on board, and send the four canoes down river, as if I intended to fetch up the remainder of our goods, as I had informed the Indians I should do; but directing them to pass up with the towing-line about mid-night, when whatever Indians might arrive I would keep drunk until the goods were conveyed above the rapids and there embarked."(7)

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(7) Coues, p.469.

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This stratagem worked. While the Sarcee and the Blood lay in





a drunken stupor, and the fatigued Hudson's Bay men slept, the Columbia brigade, passed quietly upstream.

But Henry's troubles were not yet over. At sunset the next day his cousin, William Henry, arrived from below the fort with the disquieting news that Mr. Thompson was hiding from the Piegan near the Brazeau River, not far from the old post of Boggy Hall, where he was anxiously waiting for his people. While a man went on foot to halt the Columbia brigade, which had been sent above with such risk, Henry himself set off with a party to succour David Thompson.

When the rescue party reached the explorer's camp they found him in a dejected and half-starved condition. Thoroughly wearied of the Piegan nuisance, Thompson disclosed his decision "to open a new road from North Branch (8) by

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(8) North Branch referred to the Brazeau River, Coues, p.652.

Buffalo Dung Lake to Athabaska river, and thence across the mountains to the Columbia." It was therefore essential that the Columbia brigade join its leader, and Henry returned to Rocky Mountain House to supervise the manoeuvre. Once more he doled out rum to unsuspecting natives while Thompson's men made their way downstream under cover of night and a light rain. With a note of supreme relief Henry writes: "I was happy to get clear of those canoes, that had caused me so much trouble and anxiety ever since my arrival." (9)

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(9) Ibid, p.654.

While the Canadians were penetrating the country beyond the Rockies, the English traders were watching their activities with interest. At least as early as November, 1807,



they were informed of the North West Company's presence in the Columbia region. Early in this month James Bird received word from Pruden at North Branch post that "four men, whom he had sent to Acton House to fetch some old stores concealed last spring, found there three men who had come from Mr. Thompson, who it appears had built at the side of a Lake in the Coottanaha country ..." (10)

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(10) H.B.C.Archives, B.60/a/7.

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When it became apparent that the Northwesters, in spite of extreme physical difficulties, were about to make a commercial success of their Columbia venture, the Hudson's Bay Company hastily dropped its policy of "wait and see". Since an experienced trader could not be spared at this time, Joseph Howse, clerk, was sent from York Factory in 1809 to report on the movements of the North West Company in the Rocky Mountains. Howse appears to have had an aptitude for his new work, for in 1810 he undertook a second journey to the mountains. Following the trail that David Thompson had pioneered, he entered the pass, which for no apparent reason received his name, and by way of the Columbia reached the Flathead River. After a season of profitable trade with the "Flathead Indians", he returned to the East with "Thirty six bundles of good furs". (11)

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(11) Morton, p.496.

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In travelling to and from Fort Edmonton, it is probable that Joseph Howse spent some time at Acton House. At least it is known that this post served him as a victualling depot, for on March 25, 1811, James Bird "sent off two men to



go to Acton House and from there with horses and Pemican to meet Mr.Howse at the Cootanha River, on the West side of the Rocky Mountains ... " (12) James Bird later sent William Flett

(12) Edmonton House Journal, 1810/11 H.B.C.Archives, London.

and four men to Acton House to maintain friendly relations with the Piegan chiefs so that they would not molest Joseph Howse as he descended the Saskatchewan River on his return voyage.

After the departure of Howse, and Thompson's discovery of Athabaska Pass, the Mountain Houses ceased to be intimately associated with the Columbia enterprise. In order to strengthen its organization in other areas, the older company abandoned the Pacific region to its rival, and the North West traders found it more convenient to reach that domain by way of their new route. Jasper House now became the provisioning depot for the passing brigades.

Though the importance of Rocky Mountain House had diminished, it continued to play a part in the struggle with the Hudson's Bay Company. Little violence occurred between the Acton people and their neighbours but competition for furs remained keen. Undoubtedly the Blackfoot, Blood and Sarcee continued to trade at this point, but during the last few years before union, both posts were particularly anxious to secure the trade of the Muddy River Indians or Piegan as they were generally known. (13)

(13) Governor Simpson identifies Muddy River Indians as Piegan in Para.67 of his report to the Governor and Committee, Hudson's Bay Company, London, dated Aug.10, 1832, York Factory, H.B.C. Factory Journals, Box 550, No.1063.





In March, 1820, Francis Heron visited the Hudson's Bay post to decide whether it would be necessary to send an outfit there in the future. Heron's report indicates that once again the wishes of the Muddy River Indians were given serious consideration: "Yesterday evening I returned from Acton House ... After making enquiry I found that the Muddy River Indians would feel much disgusted if that place should be abandoned and even threatened to go across the Rocky Mts. to a N.W. establishment with their Beaver should Acton House not be kept up but on the other hand they promised, should we keep up that establishment, that they would induce the Cutney [Kootenay] Indians to come with their trade..." (14)

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(14) H.B.C. Archives, B.60/a/19.

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Under these circumstances Heron was obliged "to appoint people to remain there for the summer."

On August 6, 1821, news of the coalition reached Edmonton, and though the reorganization had not yet been completed, Canadian and English traders travelled together to and from the Mountain House. Mr. John Rowand, a former North-wester, was placed in temporary charge of the post, and on October 29 he left Edmonton House "accompanied by James White-way, Charles McKay, Ritchard Colin, and some Canadians"... At this time there were "11 Englishmen and 27 Canadians" stationed at the Mountain Houses, indicating that both establishments had been in operation when union occurred.

The dreams of Alexander Mackenzie and Duncan M'Gillivray were realized at last, but too late for either of these men of vision to profit by the new organization.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE AFTER THE UNION OF 1821

The Hudson's Bay Company was now free to develop a sound administrative policy in the extensive territory covered by its charter. Wasteful competition gave way to stabilized trading under a policy of conservation, and the use of liquor was reduced or stopped altogether wherever possible.(1)

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(1) Morton, p.640.

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Many posts were abandoned with a consequent reduction by about one-half in the number of servants, and the remaining establishments, now a considerable distance apart, tended to "throw upon the Indians the burden of bringing in their furs to trade".

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(2) Ibid, p.690.

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The situation in the Rocky Mountain House area, however, was exceptional. The union had not disposed of the American traders on the Missouri, and they were still determined to establish closer trading relations with the Blackfoot tribes. The men at the Mountain Fort had to strive hard to retain their traditional Piegan trade, and since the Americans used alcohol indiscriminately, the Hudson's Bay Company could not abandon its use in this region. In addition, influential interpreters had to be paid liberally to live among these Indians in order to secure their loyalty.

The patronage of the Blackfoot confederacy, and the Piegan in particular, was of first importance to Rocky Mountain House. This confederacy, "the strongest and most aggressive



nation on the Canadian prairies", (3) consisted of three

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(3) Diamond Jenness, THE INDIANS OF CANADA (2nd ed., Ottawa: King's Printer, 1934) p.317.

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related tribes, the Blackfoot proper, the Blood and the Piegan. Though the first two frequently took robes and provisions to the Mountain House, it was the latter tribe that the Hudson's Bay Company courted and watched with most concern. The range of the Piegan extended from the Rocky Mountains into what is now Saskatchewan and from the North Saskatchewan to the upper Missouri. For many years it was from these Indians that Rocky Mountain House obtained the bulk of its beaver skins.

Affiliated with the Blackfoot organization was the little tribe of Sarcee Indians. They spoke the Athapaskan language rather than the Algonkian tongue of their allies, but gradually adopted many of the customs and habits of their protectors. (4) Yet, while seeking shelter under the Black-

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(4) Jenness, p.325.

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foot wing, the Sarcee often eyed the Piegan with considerable jealousy when trading at Rocky Mountain House. Henry called the former "a beggarly tribe, never satisfied". (5) At the

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(5) Coues, p.657.

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beginning of the nineteenth century they occupied the country near the headwaters of the North Saskatchewan River. They are now living on a reserve near Calgary.

There were a number of other tribes that traded at Rocky Mountain House, though it is difficult to name their exact hunting areas. From the west the Kootenay Indians





occasionally ventured through the passes of the Rockies in spite of the Blackfoot menace, and it appears that the Assiniboine, or Stoney Indians as they were also called, came to the fort from the north-west, near or within the mountains. This tribe now has a large reserve in the Bighorn country west of Nordegg. The Cree, whose hunting grounds lay north of Rocky Mountain House, were often at odds with the Blackfoot nation, but they too visited the upper Saskatchewan more frequently as the latter began to frequent the American posts on the headwaters of the Missouri. (6) Refer-

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(6) Rocky Mountain House journal, 1828-29, H.B.C. Archives, London.

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ences are also made to the Fall Indians who traded fairly consistently at the forks, both before and after the union. Technically known as Atsina, this tribe was usually spoken of by fur traders in Western Canada as Fall Indians or Gros Ventres of the Plains. "They were a detached branch of the Arapaho nation, and were of Algonquin stock. On Arrowsmith's map of 1811 they are marked as occupying the upper parts of the country drained by the Red Deer River." At one time they were allies of the Blackfoot. None of them are now living in Canada. (7) Alexander Henry considered them energetic fur

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(7) Dr. J.B.Tyrrell, DAVID THOMPSON'S NARRATIVE, p.304, footnote 1, and p.327 footnote 1.

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gatherers, though he disliked the lavish manner in which they offered their women to the traders for the merest trifle.

In spite of the many tribes it had accommodated in the past, the future of Rocky Mountain House was uncertain at



the time of the coalition. Chief Trader J. F. La Rocque, a former Northwester, was put in charge of it for the season of 1822-23, replacing John Rowand who was transferred to Fort Edmonton, but Governor Simpson was empowered to abandon this fort whenever he felt that it was expedient to do so. (8)

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(8) Harvey Fleming, Minutes of the Council, Northern Department of Rupert's Land, 1821-31, (Toronto, THE CHAMPLAIN SOCIETY, 1940, and London, THE HUDSON'S BAY RECORD SOCIETY, 1940).

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Chief Trader Rowand, however, recommended that it be retained for the benefit of the Fall and Piegan Indians, and Patrick Small was appointed to take charge by Simpson for the summer of 1823. In this same year Rocky Mountain House was abandoned on the advice of Chief Factor Colin Robertson, who had established McLeod's Branch. Robertson was of the opinion that the Piegan and the Blood, who were in the habit of frequenting the Mountain post, would get their supplies at Fort Edmonton and the few "strong wood" Assiniboine, those who frequented the heavily forested regions, would join their friends at McLeod's Branch. (9)

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(9) "McLeod's Branch" was the post later known as Fort Assiniboine.

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Apparently the Piegan promptly expressed dissatisfaction over this new plan, for on November 30, 1823, John Rowand wrote in the Edmonton journal: "... They the Piegan regret exceedingly that the Mountain House is abandoned, as the distance from their general hunting grounds is too great to come this length, as well as being afraid to fall in with the Stone Indians on their way hither; whereas at the Mountain [Rocky Mountain House] they lay quite secure from fear of



their enemies, as well as all other inconveniences which they must experience coming to this place [Edmonton]. They also say that we have a house for the Crees, a house for the Stone Indians, a house for the Blackfeet, Sussees [Sarcee], Blood and Fall Indians, and none for those who give us the most Beaver, meaning themselves, so that we must despise them ..." (10)

(10) Fort Edmonton Journal, 1822-23, H.B.C. Archives, London.

The protestations of these Indians, and the growing opposition of the American traders induced John Rowand to re-establish Rocky Mountain House in the autumn of 1825, and Patrick Small was again placed in charge. In a letter to the Governor and Committee in London Simpson writes: "I am concerned to say that several bands of the Piegan tribe who usually frequented the Saskatchewan with furs taken in the American Territory and across the Rocky Mountains have been intercepted on their way to our establishments by some American Trappers in the Flathead country during the last year, with whom they traded their skins. The plain Tribes are not however generally favourable to the American Traders and I think there is little doubt of our continuing to secure a good proportion of their returns particularly while Chief Factor Rowand who possesses great influence over them retains his present station." (11)

(11) Letter (Para.17) from Governor Simpson to the Governor and Committee, Hudson's Bay House, London, dated York Factory, July 25, 1827: H.B.C. Factory journals, Box 541, 811.

In paragraph 32 of the same letter Governor Simpson again refers to the Piegan trade: "We have this season per-







manently established the Rocky Mountain House for the accommodation of the Piegan, which will have the effect of drawing them during the winter from the Flathead lands and thereby keep them out of the way of the American Trappers, and our system of trade will be so liberal that to compete with us on the west side of the mountains, the Americans must lose as they cannot afford to sell their supplies taken that prodigious distance at anything like the prices we can give."

Simpson's correspondence reveals that Rocky Mountain House succeeded for a number of years in drawing a considerable amount of trade from the Blackfoot tribes. Every encouragement was rendered to these Indians, and by taking pains to keep on friendly terms with their chiefs and principal men, the English company obtained an influence over them, which the Americans found difficult to undermine. Writing in 1828, Simpson gives the Governor and Committee in London a striking example of their loyalty to the Hudson's Bay Company: "... a band of Blackfeet that was encamped with some of general Ashley's trappers (12) last summer at the Salt Lake in the

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(12) In 1822 and 1823 William H. Ashley promoted a trading organization in the United States which eventually became the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, the great rival of John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company. "Ashley sold out to Jedediah Smith, William Sublette, and David Jackson. This firm in turn sold out to the Rocky Mountain Fur Company whose proprietors were Jim Bridger, Milton Sublette, Tom Fitzpatrick, Henry Fraeb and John Baptiste Gervais." See Bernard DeVoto, *ACROSS THE WIDE MISSOURI* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1947) preface, p.xxvi.

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Snake Country, had at the time 600 Beaver skins in their possession, not one of which would they part with, notwithstanding the numberless tempting offers made them, but brought the



parcel complete throughout a journey which occupied them several months, to Mr. Rowand at the Rocky Mountain House, and this of itself shows that kind and conciliating treatment can make an impression even on these turbulent bands." (13)

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(13) Para. 54, Letter from Governor Simpson to the Governor and Committee in London, dated York Factory, July 10, 1828; H.B.C. Factory journals, Box 542, No. 865.

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The Piegan were at this time the most profitable visitors at Rocky Mountain House, and in the fall of 1829 "they brought upward of 2000 Beaver at one haul". (14) These

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(14) Para. 44, Letter from Governor Simpson to the Governor and Committee, Hudson's Bay Company, London, dated York Factory, Aug. 26, 1830; H.B.C. Factory journals, Box 546, No. 953.

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Indians, however, were no longer like those industrious trappers of old, who had won for the Piegan tribe the reputation of being the beaver hunters of the Blackfoot confederacy.

in a letter written to London in 1830, Governor Simpson remarks: "In the returns of this district [Saskatchewan] there is generally a considerable proportion of badly dressed summer and cub beaver, which is brought from the west side of the Mountains and the banks of the Missouri by the Piegan tribe who rarely hunt themselves but lay their less powerful and warlike neighbours under contribution, pillage being their ordinary occupation". (15) In spite of the ominous

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(15) Ibid.

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deterioration in the Piegan character, they remained on excellent terms with the Hudson's Bay Company establishments. "But", Simpson writes, "it is not safe to meet them in an enemy's country, as many of our poor fellows who have fallen



by their hands on the west side of the Mountains have had occasion to know." (16)

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(16) Ibid.

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Until the winter of 1830-31 the American traders had not succeeded in establishing strong trading relations with the Blackfoot tribes, but in this season an incident occurred which played directly into the hands of the Upper Missouri Outfit of which Kenneth McKenzie, a former British trader, was head. (17) As the main Piegan tribe was return-

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(17) The American Fur Company was organized by John Jacob Astor; but in 1833 its active head was Ramsay Crooks. The Western operations during this period were under the direction of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., of St. Louis. His principal field director was Kenneth McKenzie 'the King of the Missouri'. He was the head of the Upper Missouri Outfit, a principal division of the Company. McKenzie's job was, in Chouteau's words, 'ecraser toute opposition'. ACROSS THE WIDE MISSOURI, p.24.

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ing to Rocky Mountain House after a successful excursion south of the border, they were ambushed "by the Crow Mountain Tribe who killed 57 of them and took among other spoils upwards of 2000 Beaver Skins, which fell into the hands of the American traders." (18) This misadventure had an immediate

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(18) Para. 59, Letter from Governor Simpson to the Governor and Committee in London, dated York Factory, July 18, 1831; Box 549, No. 1033. "The Crow Mountain Tribe" cannot be identified.

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effect on the establishment of Rocky Mountain House. Many Piegan now found it expedient to trade at the American posts, which were situated near their country, instead of exposing themselves to the peril of enemy attack by journeying to the North Saskatchewan.







The Hudson's Bay Company, however, made every effort to check the intrusion of the Americans. In July 1832, the following resolution was passed by the Council of the Northern Department of Rupert's Land: "The recent defection of the Piegan tribe rendering it unnecessary to maintain the Rocky Mountain House which was originally established for their convenience, it is Resolved to abandon that Post and to establish a new Post to be called the Piegan Post on the borders of the 49th Parallel of Latitude, with a view to attract that Tribe, and to prevent other Indians who are in the habit of frequenting the Honble. Company's Posts in the upper part of the Saskatchewan from crossing the line." (19)

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(19) E.H.Oliver, THE CANADIAN NORTH-WEST, ITS EARLY DEVELOPMENT AND LEGISLATIVE RECORDS, Ottawa: King's Printer, 1914-15) Vol.1, p.678.

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According to Governor Simpson the treachery of one of his half-breed interpreters was chiefly responsible for the Piegan defection. Since the Piegan were now less willing to trade at Rocky Mountain House, especially as they were at variance with some of the tribes that frequented this establishment, the Hudson's Bay Company adopted the practice of sending out "confidential servants" to live and hunt with them. In this way, it was hoped, the Company would retain some of its former trade and the natives might be persuaded to gather furs with greater industry. James Bird, or "Jamey Jock" as he was commonly known by Hudson's Bay men, was one of these valuable servants. In a letter to the Governor and Committee, Simpson devotes considerable space to the description of this man's character and behaviour:



"It had likewise been usual with us to keep in pay among them [Piegan] a half-breed son of Mr. Bird (20) who was

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(20) According to J.E.A. MacLeod in his article "Piegan Post and the Blackfoot Trade" (Canadian Historical Review, Sept. 1943, footnote, p. 278.) Jamey Jock was the son of C.F. Bird and a brother of John Bird, one of the victims of the mysterious tragedy in which the explorer, Thomas Simpson, lost his life.

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brought up at the Honourable Company's establishment, and was for many years a clerk in the service, but relinquished his situation some years ago and assumed the habits and character of an Indian, connecting himself with the Piegan tribe by marriage (or rather marriages, as he has some half score of wives) and being a perfect Indian in nature and a brave determined blood thirsty fellow, he soon acquired an influence among them, and now ranks as one of their war chiefs. In order to secure the good offices of this man with the tribe, costly presents were frequently given to him and an annual salary of £20 allowed him, besides liberal payment for any skins he brought. For several years Bird, or 'Jamey Jock' (the name by which he is usually known with us), was faithful to us, and performed the services we required of him to our entire satisfaction, and last year he was sent off by Chief Factor Rowand with a large and well equipped band to hunt on some of the headwaters of the Missouri, with an understanding that he should bring them back in the fall of the year to the Rocky Mountain House on a fixed date when Mr. Rowand was to meet him - In the meantime, however, it became known that the American Fur Company established their new Post at the Forks of the Yellow Stone and



Missouri Rivers and knowing the influence which 'Jamey Jock' had over the Piegan, they [Americans] sent couriers in quest of him through the Blackfoot country, with pressing invitations to visit them, which he did taking with him every Piegan over whom he had influence to the Camp of our Opponents with between 3 and 4000 Beaver - But so much attached were they to their old friend Chief Factor Rowand, that, after reaching the American Establishment they would not have parted with their skins, had they not been assured by 'Jamey Jock' that they [Americans] were not opponents but 'brothers' or partners of their old trader the 'Iron Shirt' (the name by which they know Mr.Rowand) on the Saskatchewan. Thus, I am concerned to say we have lost a large proportion of the hunts of that valuable tribe." (21)

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(21) Para.67, Letter from Governor Simpson to Governor and Committee, Hudson's Bay Company, London, dated York Factory, August 10, 1832, H.B.C.Factory journals, Box 550, No.1063.

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In the autumn of 1832 Piegan Post was established in accordance with the Council's resolution, although its location was not on or near the 49th Parallel, but "near the north bank of the Bow River at the mouth of Old Fort Creek in latitude 51° 9' north and 155° 4' 22" west". (22)

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(22) J.E.A.MacLeod, "Piegan Post and the Blackfoot Trade" (CANADIAN HISTORICAL REVIEW, Sept.,1943) No.3, Vol.xxiv, p.278.

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The amiable John Edward Harriott, Chief Trader, was transferred from the Columbia District to take command of the new fort, and most of his future service was to be spent in the Saskatchewan district as Rowand's chief assistant..





The establishment of this post did not have the desired results, and in his report to London on July 11, 1834, Governor Simpson reveals the cause of its failure: "The Saskatchewan which was long the favorite District in the Northern Department I am concerned to say still continues to decline in point of returns, while its expenses on the other hand are gradually increasing; the profits are therefore going down rapidly, and, when the accounts are made up, I am apprehensive that we shall find a deficiency of fully £2000 on those of last year. This is owing to the proximity of the American trading posts and trapping parties to the hunting grounds of the Plain Tribes, who used to visit us from the Southward, say the Piegan, Blood, Blackfeet and Circee tribes, who have of late been drawn to the banks of the Missouri by the high opposition prices offered in that quarter, which have rendered all the personal influence of their old traders on the Saskatchewan of little avail; and notwithstanding all Jamey Jock's exertions to bring the Piegans back to us, our trade with that tribe did not exceed 500 beaver, and taking the expenses incurred in collecting them into account, at a cost exceeding double their value in the London market while the danger to which lives and property were exposed, in watching this losing trade, by the occupation of the Piegan Post, in the midst of the Plains was very great." (23)

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(23) Para.17, Letter from Governor Simpson to the Governor and Committee, Hudson's Bay Company, London, dated York Factory, July 21, 1834; H.B.C.Factory journals, Box 551, No.1172.

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It was not the custom of the frugal Simpson to maintain a position if it failed to pay dividends or at least thwart the activities of his opponents. The same report, therefore, intimated that Piegan Post would soon be abandoned in favour of Rocky Mountain House, which would enable the Company "to curtail the expenses of the District by the reduction of the complement of people". Actually Chief Trader Harriott, having experienced no improvement in the volume of trade, had departed for the Mountain House on January 8, 1834, fully six months before the date of Simpson's letter to the Governor and Committee in London. "Piegan Post was the last establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company on the south-western prairies until 1874, when John Bunn built a winter post on the Bow River above the mouth of the Ghost". (24)

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(24) Piegan Post and the Blackfoot Trade, p.278.

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The ordinary trade of the Piegan, which usually amounted to 3000 beaver per season and occasionally as much as 5000 now dropped off sharply. The Blackfoot rapidly lost their old loyalty to the English company as the high prices and presents received from the Americans enabled them to obtain all the supplies they required for less than one-third of the quantity of furs they used to bring to market. Instead of spending their time hunting and trading as formerly, they amused themselves by gambling, and by going on war and horse stealing excursions. Jamey Jock continued in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company though Simpson found it mortifying to have to tolerate "the unreasonable demands of such a fellow". However, though the nefarious Jamey was unable to undo his



original mischief, the Hudson's Bay Company were mainly indebted to his exertions for a "haul of 500 beaver" during the winter of 1833-34 which otherwise would have gone to the Americans. Simpson finally despaired of regaining the former patronage of the Piegans and other Blackfoot tribes, for the American traders by their position on the headwaters of the Missouri could more easily combine the trade in buffalo robes with the fur trade. The only means of competing was by once again providing the Blackfoot with a special establishment on the Bow River but the fate of Piegan Post in 1834 discouraged such a project. "It is evident from the character of the country and its numerous and turbulent inhabitants", reported Simpson in 1839, "that the expenses of an establishment of sufficient strength to guard against danger, would exceed the amount of returns we could reasonably calculate on being drawn by such an establishment." (25)

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(25) Letter (Para.24) from Governor Simpson to the Governor and Committee, Hudson's Bay House, London, dated Red River Settlement, July 8, 1839 (H.B.C.Factory journals, Box 559, No.1406).

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Apart from the reopening of Rocky Mountain House, Simpson reluctantly decided to make no further effort "to recover that valuable branch of trade" and Rowand now directed most of his attention toward "the thick wood trade" of the Saskatchewan district, which continued to be favourable. Nevertheless, though the Piegan took the greater part of their furs and provisions to the American posts, the Blackfoot and Sarcee bands continued to make occasional visits to Rocky Mountain House. In this way the fort retained a







small part of its former importance. During the season 1847-48 Rocky Mountain House was temporarily closed as the Blackfoot intimated that they would not be back even in small numbers. Yet Simpson was able to report in June 1848, that there had been an increase in trade over the previous season "to the amount of nearly £3000, principally in Lynx and other small furs", and the usual posts (26) remained in operation

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(26) "Edmonton, Fort Pitt, Fort Carlton, Fort Assiniboine, Lesser Slave Lake, Cumberland and Moose Lake were maintained last winter." Para.60, Letter from Simpson to Governor & Committee, Hudson's Bay Company, London, dated Norway House, June 24, 1848, H.B.C. Letters Inwd. from Sir G. Simpson, Series 1843-60.

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except the Mountain House. The Honourable Company received some consolation from the fact that the absence of the Blackfoot afforded the Cree a wider hunting ground. They were now able to penetrate into the more southern area of the Saskatchewan District.

Rocky Mountain House was again occupied in the fall of 1848 when Louis Leblanc was placed in charge. It appears to have remained in operation during each winter until 1861. In 1856 Simpson once more refers in one of his reports to the large trade formerly carried on with the Blackfoot at Rocky Mountain House and to their continued defection. He intimates that, if there were no sign of their returning to this post in the course of the current year, "it is probable that it will hereafter be abandoned in which case our chief loss will be in robes and provisions which were some years procured in large quantities at that establishment." According to the rather boastful account of Henry John Moberly, who was in charge of Rocky Mountain House during the winter of 1854-55,



supplies which he obtained in exchange for rum from Sarcee and Blackfoot bands had "helped materially to forstall the threatened food scarcity that year in the North." (27)

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(27) WHEN FUR WAS KING, p.42.

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It appears that there was almost an immediate improvement in the returns from Rocky Mountain House, for in 1857 Simpson attributes a recent increase in the collection of buffalo robes to more frequent visits from the Blackfoot during the winter. The Hudson's Bay Company was instrumental in arranging a truce between the Cree and Blackfoot confederacies, which was more faithfully kept than in the past. The latter could now visit the Saskatchewan in safety, and according to Governor Simpson these Indians preferred to trade at the English posts if prices were reasonable and the hazards of the journey not too great.

The Blackfoot bands continued to linger in the vicinity of Rocky Mountain House for a number of years but were seldom in a conciliatory mood. They frequently made unreasonable demands and endeavoured to drive hard bargains by threatening to return to the Americans with their furs and provisions. Joseph Brazeau was in charge of Rocky Mountain House from 1855 to 1861, and during this time the Hudson's Bay people were constantly worried by the insolent behaviour of the Indians. Finally the hostility of the Blackfoot became extreme; they refused to supply the post with fresh or dried meat, and at the same time threatened to kill the fort hunters. On March 28, 1861, the Edmonton journal recorded: "... two men arrived this afternoon coming ahead of Mr. Brazeau and Party from the Rocky



Mountain House who have from starvation been compelled to abandon that Establishment. Mr. Brazeau reports the Blackfoot to have always come to the Fort armed, brought no provisions or anything else, came apparently only to beg Rum and threatening to kill the people ... One of our men a European Servant is a prisoner among the Blackfeet - the 4 men who remained at the cache [near Rocky Mountain House] have a month's provisions - Mr. Brazeau informs me probably Hardisty that he is coming slowly owing to the poor state of the Horses and the deepness of the snow ... the Blackfeet have been unbearable for the last three years or more, always getting worse and worse, destroying our crops, stealing our Horses and doing everything they could to annoy us, in order to provoke a quarrel so as to kill us. They now threaten openly to kill whites, Halfbreeds or Crees where ever they find them and to burn Edmonton Fort. All this is owing to the Blackfoot chief that was killed here [Edmonton] last fall by the Crees." (28)

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(28) Edmonton House journal, 1860-61, H.B.C. Archives, London, B.60/a/31.

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After three years the Blackfoot menace appears to have subsided, for on September 13, 1864, William J. Christie at Edmonton wrote to the officer in charge at Red River: "Arrangements have been made for the re-establishment of Rocky Mountain House & our trade at that place with the Slave Indian tribes, (29) and I have no doubt, the Trade will pay well;

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(29) William Christie undoubtedly means Blackfoot Indians, which were occasionally referred to as "Slaves", Morton, p.

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owing to the number of men required to build a New Fort, it







may well be attended with some considerable expense the first year, but in a year or two it will clear all these expenses." (30)

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(30) Fort Edmonton Correspondence Book, 1863-64, Letter from William J. Christie at Edmonton to Officer in Charge at Red River, Sept. 13, 1864, H.B.C. Archives, B.60/b/1, fo. 50d.

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John McDougall who in company with his father and William Christie visited Rocky Mountain House early in January, 1866, makes the following comment about the reopening of this post: "This fort and trading post had been abandoned by the Hudson's Bay Company for some years, but in the summer of 1865 it was decided to reopen it in order to draw the trade of the surrounding Indian tribes - Blackfeet, Bloods, Piegiens and Sarcees - as also to keep these turbulent tribes as much as possible from collision with the wood and plain Crees, their hereditary foes." (31)

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(31) John McDougall, PATHFINDERS OF PLAIN AND PRAIRIE (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1898) p.128.

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Edmonton House journal 1864-65 contains many references to men passing between that place and Rocky Mountain House and probably these parties occupied the old fort which, according to Dr. James Hector, was already "tumbling to pieces" in 1858. Richard Hardisty was delegated to reopen the Mountain House and in February, 1865, two carpenters, Paquet and MacLeod, journeyed to Rocky Mountain House with him to build a new establishment a few hundred yards above the other one. According to John McDougall a temporary fort was built by Hardisty during the autumn of 1865 in the woods nearby. At the time of McDougall's visit the men were taking out timber and sawing lumber for the erection of permanent buildings during the next



season. (32)

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(32) Ibid, p.128-129.

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The sanguine hopes of Mr.Christie, however, were not entirely fulfilled. On March 28, 1865, he wrote in the Edmonton journal: "Received a letter from Mr.Hardisty at the Rocky Mt. Hse., confirming the reports we have heard of the great mortality amongst the Slave Indian Tribes which still continues. Mr.Hardisty reports the Indians to be very hard to deal with and ... blame us for sickness, and threaten to kill whites, an outbreak very much apprehended. Indians desperate, assistance in men and arms requested." (33)

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(33) Edmonton House journal, 1864-65, H.B.C.Archives, B.60/a/34.

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Rocky Mountain House journals reveal that the people at the fort were frequently on the verge of starvation during the period of 1866-68. But the volume of trade must have been sufficient to justify the operation of the post during the winter seasons. References are made to trade with the Stony, the Blood and the Blackfoot, the latter tribe, as before, giving a great deal of trouble.

In January, 1873, W. S. Gore visited Rocky Mountain House for the purpose of surveying the land around the post granted to the Company under Article 2 of the Deed of Surrender of 1869. (34) Although the fort was in excellent condition,

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(34) E.H.Oliver, THE CANADIAN NORTH-WEST, ITS EARLY DEVELOPMENT AND LEGISLATIVE RECORDS (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1914-15) Vol,11, p.942.

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he found that very little trading was being done there as the fickle Blackfoot had once more returned to the Americans. The usefulness of Rocky Mountain House had come to an end.



Chief Trader Hackland, who served at this post from 1867 to 1871, was the last trader of any note to occupy Rocky Mountain House.

In 1875 the Mountain Post was abandoned in accordance with the instructions contained in a letter from Chief Commissioner James A. Grahame at Fort Garry to Chief Factor Richard Hardisty at Edmonton, dated December 28, 1874:

"... the Post at the Rocky Mountain House has been a grievous expense to us & as you acknowledge, its Returns are of no importance. If no improvement is exhibited this winter you will at once close it up endeavouring to find some one you can depend upon to take charge of it. The useless expenditure of money keeping up unprofitable Stations because they cost money, while the prospect of future advantage from them is hopeless, is false policy and very detrimental to the Result of the business, which should in every branch be paying.

"The question of the removal of the R.M.Hse. Buildings to Fort Pitt has been discussed but I have not yet had your final opinion upon the expense thereby likely to be incurred and have to request you to furnish it by first opportunity." (35)

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(35) Comr. J.A. Grahame Correspondence, 1874, H.B.C. Archives, D.13/a. fo/63. See Appendix for further correspondence concerning the disposal of the buildings.

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Angus Fraser, an interpreter and probably a half-breed, remained in the fort during the winter of 1874-75, and in the spring Hardisty advanced him a small supply of goods on condition that he "look after the Establishment during the summer without any expense to the Company." The correspondence







between James Grahame and Richard Hardisty brought about the final abandonment of historic Rocky Mountain House, which for seventy-six years had survived so many vicissitudes in the fur trade.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### MISSIONARY WORK AT ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE

The history of Rocky Mountain House is not complete without some reference to those intrepid men who were not concerned with profits from furs, but faced innumerable perils and hardships in order to spread the Gospel among the savages. No Mission was established at the Mountain post but this area was visited frequently by both Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Their task was not easy, as the Indians were loath to abandon their pagan beliefs and rituals. Even after a tribe had accepted the white man's religion, the missionaries were obliged to make periodic visits to its camp in order to hold religious services, solemnize marriages and baptize children or new converts. In times of plague they nursed and consoled the sick and dying. Of necessity these men were completely indifferent to luxury, or even ordinary conveniences, vigorous in mind and body, and endowed with a remarkable degree of self-reliance and courage.

In 1840 the Wesleyan Methodist Church in England, with the sanction of the Hudson's Bay Company, established a mission at Fort Edmonton, and, according to Rev. James Evans who was at that time General Superintendent of Wesleyan Missions in Rupert's Land, William Rundle was the first Protestant missionary to be stationed on the upper North Saskatchewan. (1) His territory extended from Edmonton to Rocky

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(1) Archibald O. MacRae, HISTORY OF ALBERTA (Western Canada History Co., 1912) Vol.1, p.155.

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Mountain House, and his work was principally among the Cree,



Stoney and Blackfoot. It is recorded that in February, 1841, he paid a visit to Rocky Mountain House, where he was kindly received by J. H. Harriott, the chief factor in charge. The Blackfoot Indians at the fort seemed to have appreciated the missionary's attentions, for with the naïveté of small children they openly showed their affection for him. On February 22 Rundle writes: "I found several Indians at the fort and shortly after my arrival another party arrived from the plains. Great warmth of feeling was expressed by them on seeing me. Their dresses were profusely adorned with beads and gay embroidery, with porcupine quills and other ornaments. Whilst I was saluting them, some kissed me, others, after shaking me by the hand, passed both hands over part of my dress, uttering at the same time a kind of prayer, and others gave me the left hand, because nearest the heart." (2) Several days later a

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(2) Ibid, p.155-157; quoted from "HUDSON'S BAY TERRITORIES", R.M.Martin, 1849, p.133.

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rumour spread among the fanciful Indians that Mr.Rundle had come "down from Heaven in a piece of paper, and that the paper was opened by a gentleman belonging to the fort."

The missionary spoke to the natives, through an interpreter, on the subject of baptism and marriage and endeavoured to teach them "the morals and duties of Christianity". He also took the opportunity to solemnize two native marriages in the presence of over a hundred Piegan and Blackfoot Indians.

On the first day of April Rev. Mr. Rundle departed on horseback for the plains in search of the main Blackfoot camp. In his diary he records: "My kind friend, Mr.Harriott,





accompanied me some distance from the fort, and I was then compelled to bid him adieu for a season. The personal kindnesses I received from the gentleman during my stay with him, and also the assistance he afforded me in facilitating the objects of my mission, deserve my warmest commendation. I trust my visit to his fort will be made a blessing to many. Great attention was generally manifested by the officers and others, and, independent of the services on Sunday, I was accustomed to preach once during the week to them, and also to hold regular family worship, which most of the fort attended." (3)

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(3) Ibid, p.156.

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John Harriott extended similar hospitality to Father De Smet, a Jesuit priest from St.Louis, who, in the course of his search for the Blackfoot, arrived at Rocky Mountain House on October 4, 1845. He left a glowing account of his agreeable host: "The respectable and worthy commander of the fort, Mr. Harriote, an Englishman by birth, is among the most amiable gentlemen I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. He invited and received into his hospitable fort the poor missionary, a Catholic and a stranger, with a politeness and cordiality truly fraternal. These qualities characterize all the gentlemen of the Hudson's Bay Company, and although Mr. Harriote is a Protestant, he encouraged me to visit the Blackfeet, who would soon arrive at the fort, promising me to use all his influence with these barbarians to obtain me a friendly reception. He has resided many years among them,



nevertheless he did not conceal from me that I should soon be exposed to great dangers." (4)

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(14) Hiram M. Chittenden, and Alfred T. Richardson, FATHER PIERRE-JEAN DE SMET'S LIFE AND TRAVELS AMONG THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS, 1905, Vol.2, p.518.

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Though disappointed in not finding the Blackfoot at the fort, Father De Smet was warmly welcomed by a small band of Cree. "The joy my presence seemed to occasion them," he remarked in a letter to one of his many correspondents, "proved that I was not the first priest they had seen. Moreover, the greater number wore medals and crosses. They informed me that they too had been so fortunate as to have a Blackgown (Reverend Mr.Thibault) who taught them to know and serve the Great Spirit, and baptized all their children, with the exception of three who were absent on the occasion. These children were brought to me - I administered baptism to them, and at the same time to one of my guides, a Kootenai. During their stay at the fort, I gave them instruction every evening." (5)

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(5) Ibid, p.519.

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Father De Smet, who had great influence over many tribes of the Middle West, was to be called upon repeatedly by the government of the United States to assist in persuading the natives to accept negotiation and treaty. (6)

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(6) Ibid, preface, p.vii.

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During his visit at Rocky Mountain House an incident occurred which revealed even this early in his career that he possessed unusual skill as a mediator:



"Two Crees, of the same band and family, had been killed in a quarrel two years since. The presence of the offending party for the first time since the perpetration of the murder, rekindled in the others the spirit of rancor and revenge so natural to an Indian's breast, and which only the Christian religion is able to mollify, and there was every reason to apprehend fatal consequences from the old feud.

"With the approbation of Mr. Harriote, I assembled them all in the fort; the Governor himself had the kindness to be my interpreter. He made a long discourse on the obligation and necessity of their coming to a sincere reconciliation; the matter was discussed in form, each Indian giving his opinion in turn, with a good sense and moderation that surprised me. I had the pleasure and satisfaction of seeing the calumet passed around the assembly. This is the solemn pledge of peace - the token of Indian brotherhood - the most formal declaration of the entire forgetfulness and sincere pardon of an injury." (7)

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(7) Ibid, p.519.

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At length thirteen Blackfoot arrived at the post, and the old chief of the band embraced the priest quite tenderly upon learning the purpose of his journey. Father De Smet writes: "He was profuse in attention to me, making me sit beside him whenever I went to visit them in their apartment - shaking me affectionately by the hand and amicably rubbing my cheeks with his scarlet-painted nose. He cor-





dially invited me to his country, offering to be my guide and to introduce me to his people." (8)

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(8) Ibid, p.523.

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It was later arranged that the band would precede the missionary to the main Blackfoot camp in order to prepare the natives for his message. Shortly afterwards he took leave of the Mountain Fort, having resided there at his own expense for almost a month, and headed southward into the wilderness of the prairies. He was accompanied by two half-breeds, one a churlish fellow who acted as interpreter and guide. According to surname and character he appears to have been none other than Jamey Jock, the person responsible for the original defection of the Piegan. Whether he was jealous of the missionary's kindly welcome by the Blackfoot chief at Rocky Mountain House, or was simply an enemy of the good, Bird soon revealed his bad faith. "It was impossible to draw from him a single pleasant word," wrote Father De Smet, "and his incoherent mutterings and allusions became subjects of serious apprehensions." (9)

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(9) Ibid, p.527.

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After ten anxious days he encountered a Canadian with his Indian family who agreed to remain with him for some time. The next day his interpreter disappeared, much to the relief of the priest who later wrote: "Had it not been for my opportune meeting with the Canadian, it is probable I should not have escaped his deep-laid plan against me."

On December 3, 1843, John Rowand sent, almost a month too late, the following warning from Edmonton: "Beware,



my good sir, of your interpreter Bird. He hates everything connected with the French or Canadians. Munroe is not a bad sort of man, but I cannot recommend him as fit to interpret what you have to say to the natives. Munroe does well enough at a trading post and in the shop." (10) Interpreters were scarce indeed and missionaries had to do the best with what

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(10) Ibid, p.528.

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they had. Munroe was not available at the time and De Smet had no alternative but to accept the services of Bird.

After three weeks of intense suffering Father De Smet returned to Rocky Mountain House, and thence to Edmonton, where he spent the winter. Since the Cree were out in force against the Blackfoot, he decided to "await a more favourable moment" to visit the latter tribe, but there is no indication that he ever again reached the Mountain House.

The missionary most closely associated with Rocky Mountain House was probably that indefatigable priest known throughout the West as Father Lacombe. The Edmonton journal records that he left for this fort on January 22, 1861, and returned on February 13, "bringing letters". It is possible that he had been at the Mountain House on previous occasions to instruct the Blackfoot in the Catholic doctrine. Early in 1865, while Richard Hardisty was in charge, he went there to assist the Blackfoot who were suffering from typhoid fever. Father Lacombe again visited Rocky Mountain House toward the end of December in the same year after narrowly escaping death on the prairies when a strong party of Cree surprised the



Blackfoot band with whom he was travelling. The presence of the priest caused the Cree to withdraw, out of love and respect for the man who had cared for them on many occasions of sickness. After treating the wounds of the victims, Lacombe made his way to Rocky Mountain House where he had arranged a Christmas rendezvous with the Blackfoot. Richard Hardisty received the dishevelled missionary with a consideration that the latter recalled to the end of his life: "Richard Hardisty treated me like a brother that day. I felt so sick and tired and hungry when I got to Mountain House that I was ready to lie down in the snow and die. But he took our miserable party in before his big fire, and warmed and fed us and clothed me, and I always feel since then that he saved my life." (11)

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(11) Katherine Hughes, THE BLACKROBE VOYAGEUR, (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1911) p.123.

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Shortly after New Year's Day, 1870, we again find Father Lacombe journeying to Rocky Mountain House to preach to the Blackfoot Indians who were in that area. He spent many hours teaching them prayers, hymns and the catechism, as well as continuing the study of their language.

In the following November he and Father Scollen travelled by dog-team from St. Albert to Rocky Mountain House, and spent the winter there collecting and revising notes for the Cree dictionary and grammar which Father Lacombe was preparing. It was on this occasion that Lacombe met Captain William Butler, whom he described as "a pleasant and fine looking man." Butler visited with the priest for several days and was deeply interested in his many strange experiences among the Indians of the plains.





John McDougall, the eldest son of George and Elizabeth McDougall, and Protestant contemporary of Father Lacombe, also included Rocky Mountain House in his extensive missionary field. In 1853 the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Canada assumed responsibility for the Methodist Mission in Rupert's Land, (12) and George McDougall, accompanied by John, travel-

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(12) J.H.Riddell, METHODISM IN THE MIDDLE WEST (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1946) p.40.

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led from Norway House in 1862 to establish a new mission in the far West. In a previous conversation between the elder McDougall and Thomas Woolsey, who was in charge of the Methodist Mission at Fort Edmonton, it was decided that the best site for the new establishment would be at Victoria, "a strategic point on the great river highway into the West and North." (13)

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(13) Ibid, p.47.

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In the following year Elizabeth McDougall arrived at Victoria, now known as Pagan, with the five younger children, and for a long time lived in lonely isolation. With exemplary courage she managed the large Mission House while her husband and John were absent on missionary work which occasionally took them as far away as the Clearwater.

Their first trip to Rocky Mountain House was in 1865, shortly after celebrating the New Year at Victoria. George McDougall had promised to marry a Mr. McAuley to Miss Brazeau, the daughter of Chief Trader Brazeau, who was then second in command at Rocky Mountain House, and at the same time he hoped to meet the Stoney Indians. The good influence of these missionaries later saved this tribe from being exploited by the



"whisky traders" from the United States; the McDougalls encouraged the Stoney to take their furs to Rocky Mountain House and Fort Edmonton, where the liquor trade was restricted.

The party, consisting of George and John McDougall, William Christie who was Chief Factor of the Saskatchewan District, and the groom, rode in carioles pulled by dogs. Tents and buffalo robes provided some shelter at night, and their diet consisted of pemmican and hot tea, yet the intense cold of January could scarcely be endured. The younger McDougall later recalled: "The cold was omnipresent. In great chunks, in morsels, in atoms, it was all about us. You could reach out and grasp it. You could shiver in your clothes and feel it. You could almost smell it and see it, and you could hear it plainly enough as with might and force it strained the very earth and made the forest monarchs crack as if they were so many ends to its lash." (14) Upon reaching the

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(14) John McDougall, PATHFINDERS ON PLAIN AND PRAIRIE (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1898) p.131.

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fort the missionaries were fortunate in meeting a considerable number of Mountain Stoney and Blackfoot, and services were held for both whites and Indians. After the marriage ceremony had been performed and the wedding supper eaten, the hardy McDougalls returned to Fort Edmonton, again travelling in sub-zero weather at the remarkable rate of sixty miles a day.

During February, 1869, John McDougall joined Richard Hardisty, his future brother-in-law, and a number of other Company servants in a visit to Rocky Mountain House. Chief



Trader James Hackland, who was in charge of the fort at this time, welcomed them "with the usual cheer of the Hudson's Bay post." "On Sunday at Service," wrote the young missionary, there were many nationalities present, English, Scotch, French, mixed bloods, Cree, Stoney, Blackfoot, Protestant, Roman Catholic and Pagan, and I did my best, with the help of the Lord, as I spoke in Cree, which was practically the universal medium of the time." (15) He held two services during his stay

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(15) John McDougall, IN DAYS OF THE RED RIVER REBELLION  
(Toronto: W. Briggs, 1911) p.43.

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and visited the people in the fort as well as the Indians in their camps which lay near the establishment.

John McDougall saw Rocky Mountain House for the last time in May, 1915, by then no longer a formidable fort but a busy frontier village. He recalled his previous visit in the spring of 1871, when he had travelled to this post on behalf of the Hudson's Bay Company to forestall an attack which Richard Hardisty believed was threatening. During the journey his dogs had to be abandoned because of the early thaw; fortunately he encountered a small party of Hudson's Bay men from whom he obtained two horses. There was at this time no human habitation between Edmonton and Rocky Mountain House except a small Methodist Mission at Pigeon Lake. (16)

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(16) "THE GUIDE", Rocky Mountain House, May 28, 1915.

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The Anglican Church established a mission at Edmonton in 1876, the year in which Rocky Mountain House was abandoned, although Canon William Newton may have taken shelter at the latter post in the course of his long journeys to the South. His judgement of the Hudson's Bay Company differed sharply







from the opinions of the missionaries already mentioned. In a startling comment on its morality he states: "I have myself seen in the Mountain Fort, a curious arrangement for serving out rum in trade with the Blackfeet, and near Edmonton Fort is 'Drunken Lake', keeping up the tradition of Hudson (sic) Bay's most unholy rites - a tradition not likely to be soon extinguished." (17)

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(17) Rev. William Newton, TWENTY YEARS ON THE SASKATCHEWAN  
(London: Stock, 1897) p.43.

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It can be seen that a variety of useful functions was performed by the frontier missionaries. Although conversion was their primary object they could not ignore the material needs of the Indians. They showed real concern for the sick at the risk of their own lives, and did what they could for those natives who desired to read and write. Some of these men endeavoured to assist agricultural development in the West. Father Lacombe established several small settlements for Indians and half-breeds, taught them farming methods, brought in a grist mill and at St. Albert built the first bridge west of Fort Garry across the Sturgeon River. Earlier, in 1862, he organized the first brigade of Red River carts to go to Fort Garry for supplies. In 1871 John McDougall and his brother brought horses and cattle into Southern Alberta for the first time. Catholic and Protestant missionaries were also most influential in maintaining peaceful relations between white men and Indians during periods of unrest, and assisted the federal government on several occasions by persuading the natives to accept treaty.



Often they failed to turn the red man from his old religious practices. It is known that no adults among the Blood Indians were baptised during the first twenty years of missionary work, and by 1907 most of them were still pagan.(18)

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(18) Charles M. MacInnes, IN THE SHADOW OF THE ROCKIES  
(London: Rivingtons, 1930) p.272.

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Yet the pioneering efforts of the first missionaries in the North-West Territories paved the way for more gratifying progress with the Indian children for whom residential schools were later maintained, subsidized by the Dominion Government but under the direction of home mission departments of various churches.

When agriculture succeeded hunting as the chief means of gaining a livelihood, the work of the Church in the West assumed a different aspect. Its new task was one of extending adequate religious facilities to frontier homesteaders who had grown accustomed to the Church in older Christian communities. In the beginning leadership and financial aid was required from outside, but it was expected that self-supporting congregations would eventually emerge.

Services were at first conducted by itinerant missionaries. The Presbyterian Church was the first religious body to reach the Rocky Mountain House district during the period of settlement, appointing Mr. R. H. MacDonald as student missionary to this field in May, 1909. Though he did not have to travel the great distances of his predecessors, the territory which he served was fairly extensive. Besides Rocky Mountain House it included the adjacent districts of



Leslieville, Beaver Flats and Prairie Creek, making it impossible for him to hold regular Sunday services in any one community. Shortly afterwards the Anglican Church was represented by Charles Hives, a licensed layreader, and the people of this area were able to attend the church of their preference. This split created two struggling congregations instead of a single strong one, but for the sake of greater spiritual satisfaction the settlers were willing to make the sacrifice.

For want of a special place of worship both denominations were obliged to hold services in the homes of their members, or in any other building that happened to be available. The village blacksmith, Mr. F. E. Good, on at least one occasion offered Mr. MacDonald the use of his shop, while on the same Sunday Mr. C. Hives held services in a cement shed belonging to the Alberta Central Railway. (19) Even the pool

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(19) The "ECHO" Rocky Mountain House, March 19, 1912.

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hall sometimes served in the capacity of a church. William Kirby, the first postmaster of Rocky Mountain House, remembers that congregations were frequently embarrassed by the profanity of rude teamsters entering or leaving the hamlet; nevertheless, attendance was good and the collection plate usually heavy.

It was soon felt that the erection of some kind of a church building was essential to the development of a large and consistent membership as well as to the growth of adequate subsidiary organizations. Largely through the leadership of Mr. Thomson, the new Presbyterian student in the hamlet, and





Mr.Hives, a mission hall measuring 24 feet by 36 feet was built in the summer of 1912. Though a modest structure, it enabled the people of the community to worship more conveniently and also provided accommodation for a Sunday School. At other times the hall was used for public and social gatherings, facilitating in this way civic and cultural activities besides religious functions.

The Roman Catholic Church was slower in reaching this area during the period of settlement, although it had been one of the first to bring Christianity to the Indians at Rocky Mountain House. Father Voisin celebrated mass for the first time here on Sunday, February 16, 1913, and since attendance was good the Catholic settlers were confident that they too would ultimately have their own church. Twelve years later a meeting of the Catholic people of the village was held in the Mount View Hotel to discuss plans for the construction of such a building. On this occasion approximately one thousand dollars was subscribed, His Grace Archbishop O'Leary of Edmonton granting half of the sum. In August, 1926, the Archbishop assisted by Fathers Sullivan and McDonald, conducted dedication and confirmation services at the newly built St.Joseph's Catholic Church.

The mission hall was apparently used for a long period as the first church was not completed until 1923. The Protestant people of Rocky Mountain House decided to erect a church in 1919 as a tribute to the men of the district who had lost their lives in the Great War. Through local donations and a large sum of money borrowed from the Presbyterian



Missionary Society of Toronto, they eventually achieved their purpose. The new building, which is simply but attractively designed, was called the Memorial Church and was intended "for the use of all Christian denominations in the town", (20) although it remained the property of the Presbyterian Church. To honour those in the community who died

(20) "THE GAZETTE", Rocky Mountain House, October 5, 1922.

in the Second World War, a beautiful stained glass window and a plaque containing their names were placed in the church. "The Mountaineer" indicates that a Canadian Girls in Training group was organized by the Presbyterian congregation in the fall of 1925, and in November a Mr. Jackson of Red Deer visited Rocky Mountain House to organize the Trail Rangers, thirteen boys joining at the initial meeting. The Memorial Church is now used solely by the Presbyterian section of the community.

In May 1927, the Church of England started confirmation classes for boys, girls and adults. During the same year the Anglican women organized a Woman's Auxiliary, and Rev. Canon Merrick came out from Red Deer on this occasion to assist them. Although the monthly collections were often under fifty dollars, (21) the newly formed Women's Auxiliary

(21) "THE MOUNTAINEER", June 9, 1927, states that collections for the last three Sundays in May amounted to \$36.16.

was assured that aid in building a church would be forthcoming from the Diocesan Board on request. There was not always a fully qualified minister available to hold services, but a student minister took charge of the parish between university terms. Frequently the members were assisted by Cannon Merrick of Red Deer who conducted baptismal ceremonies



at Rocky Mountain House, and on more rare occasions Bishop Sherman of Calgary would pay a pastoral visit to the village during which he sometimes held confirmation services.

By 1928 the hard work of the Anglican congregation began to show real promise for the future. In the early summer Rev. Victor Smith became the resident clergyman for the Church of England at Rocky Mountain House, taking up temporary residence in Mr. William Kirby's cottage, and definite plans for the erection of a church were formed. The building, to be called Holy Trinity Church, was ready for use in the autumn of 1930, and the dedication ceremony was conducted by Bishop Sherman on Sunday, October 26. Though not yet completed, the work of construction had progressed sufficiently to reveal an artistic and comfortable interior. In his remarks on this occasion the Bishop commended the congregation and its various leaders for their splendid cooperative effort which was at last rewarded "in the completion and dedication of this beautiful edifice." (22)

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(22) "THE MOUNTAINEER", October 15, 1930, p.1.

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With three denominations well equipped to serve those people who desired religious instruction, the pioneering work of the churches in this area was largely over. Within a period of twenty years a promising Christian community had emerged from the wilderness near the old fort, where in less tranquil days missionaries had sought to enlighten the heathen Blackfoot tribes.







THE FIRST THREE CHURCHES AT ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE



Holy Trinity Church, dedicated on October 26, 1930.



St. Joseph's Catholic Church,  
dedicated in August, 1926.

Memorial Presbyterian  
Church, built in 1923.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### EARLY SETTLEMENT

After the departure of the fur traders, the Rocky Mountain House area lay dormant until the beginning of the twentieth century. Settlers were not interested in this remote part of the country while good homesteading land was available in the park areas. The splendid farming district around Red Deer, which is approximately sixty miles east of the old fort, was surveyed in 1883 and in 1891 the Canadian Pacific Railroad between Edmonton and Calgary had reached the hamlet of Red Deer, giving further impetus to settlement. Seven years later this community had a population of 125 people, while at Rocky Mountain House the only vestige of the white man was the blackened ruins of a trading post. (1)

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(1) Annie L. Gaetz, THE PARK COUNTRY (Vancouver: Wrigley Printing Co., 1948)

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It was not until 1904 that the first homesteader pushed within sight of those mountains which, over a hundred years before, Peter Pangman had viewed from the same place. Unlike their predecessors, who lived upon the wild animals, the settlers depended primarily on the soil for their existence. The earliest pioneers usually located on small prairies which frequently occurred within the wooded area, for these open spaces could be more easily broken and cropped. Later homesteaders were left with the poorer land and the heavier clearing.

Like the adjacent districts of Eckville, Stauffer, Raven and Leslieville, the Rocky Mountain House region filled



up rapidly during the ten years preceding the outbreak of the first World War. The majority of the settlers were of Anglo-Saxon origin, coming from Eastern Canada, the Middle Western States, and the United Kingdom. There were a few immigrants, however, from continental Europe, enthusiastic over the new Province of Alberta where free land was still available. These were optimistic years in the West and, as in other infant communities, the homesteaders of Rocky Mountain House were inspired rather than discouraged by the hardships and toil of their new life. Although for several years their roads were no more than trails, they were always confident that the railroad would soon arrive, which, it was generally believed, would solve marketing difficulties and bring prosperity to all.

Settlement moved westward chiefly from Red Deer and Innisfail, though some people came from Lacombe. The Prairie Creek district, lying south-west of Rocky Mountain House, was settled from Innisfail. Homesteaders first entered the Raven area, then Stauffer further to the north-west, and eventually crossed the Clearwater River where the hamlets of Chedderville and Dovercourt later appeared. This line of settlement continued to move west until it penetrated the wooded country around and even beyond Prairie Creek, that lengthy tributary which rises in the Rocky Mountains and joins the Clearwater near its confluence with the North Saskatchewan River. To serve the hardy families that settled further upstream, Vetchland Post Office was established by







the Dominion Government in 1911, and Mr. G. L. Gabler, one of the first pioneers in this district, was hired to haul the mail by democrat from Rocky Mountain House. Vetchland was renamed Strachan in memory of G. D. Strachan who came into the country with Joseph Chambers and was later killed in World War 1. Mr. Chambers, also a veteran, remained in the Prairie Creek district till 1941, and was engaged as secretary to that Municipality from 1930 to 1939, when in the latter year financial stress caused it to revert to the status of "local improvement district". Joseph Chambers, who is now secretary-treasurer of the Raven Municipality, recalls many interesting incidents which occurred during his home-steading days. He used to trade at Stauffer, some twenty-five miles south-east of Strachan, where two early pioneers, C. H. Stauffer and J. D. Ducommun, had started the original store. Such centres were a boon to scattered communities, enabling the farmers to get their provisions and mail with less hardship. Supplies for these outlying stores were hauled by team from Innisfail or Red Deer over rough trails which skirted marshes and cut across creeks and rivers. In winter the drivers sometimes had to face blizzards and intense cold, while the horses struggled desperately against banks of snow, frequently sinking down to their bellies in continuous drifts. Travelling in the spring was equally toilsome; wagons and teams often bogged down in ruts and mire, and turgid streams were dangerous to ford.

The country around Rocky Mountain House was settled principally from Red Deer where the Land Titles Office was



located. The first family to reach the region consisted of George and Fred Fletcher and their mother, who had recently arrived from England. George, the elder brother, set out alone from Red Deer with wagon and a borrowed team in April, 1904. His purpose was to look over the country that lay to the west. Although good land was still available in less isolated places, he decided to squat near the old fort. After building a shack there for shelter he returned to Red Deer for the rest of the family and supplies. On the journey back the Fletchers found that both the Medicine and Horseguard Rivers were flooded, but by caulking the wagon box with a shirt, they were able to ferry across, reaching their new home on June 26, 1904. That summer Alexander Thomson settled fourteen miles away and Andy Ross squatted where Stauffer now stands. For several years the Fletcher family had no other neighbours.

In 1906 this country was surveyed into ranges, townships and sections. On December 19th of the same year, Frank Highstead, who had come from Minnesota, made the first homestead entry, filing on the S.W. $\frac{1}{4}$  of Section 2, Township 40, Range 7, west of the fifth meridian. During the following two years applications for homesteads were made by George Fletcher, the original settler, John H. Bertrand whose homestead later became the townsite of Rocky Mountain House, W.G. Waters, W. McKay, Thomas Gray who started the first store in the district, J. F. Gray and Ernest Ross, who at present operates a large garage in the town. By the end of 1910 many other families had moved into this area, and a new rural com-



munity began to take form. At first the nearest store and post-office were at Stauffer, a distance of 28 miles, but the influx of settlers soon brought improved conditions and the companionship of closer neighbours. In June, 1909, the Federal Government authorized the opening of Prairie Grange Post Office on the homestead of W. S. McKenzie who acted as post-master. The office was joined to his house, which was situated on the opposite side of the river from the chimneys, about three-quarters of a mile from the present town. For several years John Bertrand carried the weekly mail from Stauffer which was served twice weekly from Innisfail by way of Markerville and Raven. In August, 1911, the growing settlement secured a semi-weekly delivery, truly an excellent service compared with that of some settlements in Alberta today which have only a weekly delivery, and none at all when weather and roads are bad.(2)

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(2) Personal experiences at Dunstable, Alberta, and Timeu, Alberta, during the spring and summer of 1948.

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The first store in the district was opened in December, 1909, by Thomas Gray whose farm was situated two miles west of the chimneys, and here the farmers were able to procure their more essential goods, though he himself had the arduous task of bringing them in from Red Deer. Mr. Gray had no intention of becoming primarily a merchant; nevertheless he carried a line of staple goods at his farm residence until 1912, when he sold out to John Killick, who now operates the successful Killico Stores at Rocky Mountain House.

Typical of the hardy pioneers who opened up this area is Martin Borstad. He was among those thousands of American





TYPICAL PIONEER BUILDINGS



John H. Bertrand's house as it looked during the early days of homesteading. John Bertrand's granddaughter and her family are now living in it. This interesting relic of the pioneer era should be preserved.



The Bertrand house as it looks today.





A.J. Pingrey's homestead.



A pack outfit leaving Tom Gray's store.



A homestead house still standing near  
Rocky Mountain House.



immigrants entering Western Canada during the decade that preceded the First World War. With hardly more than the clothes he wore Mr. Borstad walked from Red Deer to the scattered settlement around the old fort and selected a homestead about two miles south of the forks. Like his neighbours he cleared his land with only an axe and grub hoe, and broke the virgin soil with a walking plough pulled by horses or oxen. For want of better equipment most of the pioneers used a small disk to till their fields, and some also employed a crude harrow fashioned from branches of willow trees. Logs were often chained together and hauled across the fields to level the raw breaking. All seeding was done by hand. As binders were expensive, the first crops were cut with mowers; the grain was then raked and stacked to provide fodder for the cattle and horses during the long winters.

In the wooded country it usually took homesteaders three or four years to clear enough land to support their families. Meanwhile many were obliged to eke out a slim living by working in the saw mills and lumber camps of the Great West Lumber Company which had its headquarters at Red Deer; others earned a little money doing road work. In 1911 a number of farmers joined construction gangs that had commenced work on two railway lines, running west from the Calgary-Edmonton Railroad toward Rocky Mountain House.

Those people who arrived from older communities soon discovered, usually with considerable dismay, that they had to adjust themselves to a drastically different environ-







ment. In 1908 Alfred Brockman, an early pioneer who still resides at Rocky Mountain House, left a secure position on the English railways and the beautiful country of Kent to begin life anew in the Canadian West. Unemployment was an unusual experience for him, and the questionable conduct of some remittance men in Alberta made his situation all the more embarrassing. "In many places where I sought work," Mr. Brockman recalls, "I found placards which read: 'Englishmen Need Not Apply'." After spending several unprofitable years in Edmonton, he was drawn to Rocky Mountain House by attractive reports concerning free land in the district. To conserve his dwindling savings he walked to Red Deer, instead of travelling by train, and there filed on a homestead at the Land Titles Office. He built a log shack measuring twelve feet by ten feet on his new farm and then returned to the city for his young wife and three small children. On February 21, 1910, Harry Bertrand, the son of John Henry Bertrand, met the Brockman family with a sleigh at the Arlington Hotel in Red Deer. When provisions and household equipment had been loaded, the small party began the long journey to Rocky Mountain House, following one of the several trails which were then in common use. (3)

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(3) Interview with Alfred Brockman on April 18, 1952, at Rocky Mountain House.

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During the two succeeding summers Alfred Brockman was obliged to leave his wife and children in order to earn money in Edmonton laying pipes for the city sewer system. In the winter months he, like most of his neighbours, re-



mained at home until money again became scarce; it was then customary to "go into the bush" to hew trees for a dollar per day. John Bertrand once accepted a tough team of cayuses with harness as his winter's wages. The outfit which had employed him was unable to pay cash having lost all of its ties while attempting to drive them down the North Saskatchewan to Edmonton. The pioneers at Rocky Mountain House were perforce road builders and lumberjacks, as well as tillers of the soil, and in view of the many hardships that they endured, it is truly remarkable so few of them gave up their homesteads.

Another ordeal which the settlers faced was the grueling task of bringing in supplies, especially during bad weather. The establishment of local stores reduced the amount of travelling to some extent, but many farmers preferred to take advantage of the lower prices and greater variety of commodities available at the larger trading centre. One of the roads leading west from Red Deer was the Hudson's Bay Trail which in the past had been used by fur traders and Indians. It followed in a winding fashion the highest land up to Sylvan Lake, which was crossed when the surface was solidly frozen but otherwise skirted. The trail then angled across country to Eckville and from this point passed through the Blueberry Hills to Leslieville, where for several years Dan McLeod provided food and shelter at reasonable prices for the travellers. Occasionally a merry crowd would congregate at his house and stories would be told late into the night. Eventually the tired travellers would roll up in their blankets and sleep soundly on the rough floor. At



dawn the last leg of the trip would begin. This part of the journey was particularly rough for corduroy roads had been built across the muskegs between Eckville and Rocky Mountain House.

Often it was necessary to ford creeks and rivers, though crossings were later constructed at the most dangerous places. A bridge finally spanned the Medicine River at old Eckville, about two miles north of the present town, and there was another bridge north-west of Evarts on the same River. Pole crossings were usually built over creeks but these constructions were frequently washed away during the spring thaw. Travellers learned through bitter experience that it was wise to carry a block and tackle so that they could pull their vehicles out of bogs and mudholes. Some carried tents with them, and everyone a blanket roll and a canvas which served as a ground sheet. When their horses tired, the pioneers would camp under the wagon if no other shelter was near. It took Martin Borstad six days to make a round trip to Red Deer; two days were required to reach the town, shopping took another day and three days were needed to return with the load of groceries, horses feed and other essential supplies. (4)

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(4) Interview with Martin Borstad at Rocky Mountain House, August, 1951.

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Mrs. Martin Borstad, formerly Helen Bertrand, recounts her experience on such a trip made in June, 1908, as follows:

"My first long trip from Minneapolis to Innisfail took two days and two nights. My father was to meet me there







but bad roads had delayed him. I went to the hotel and after a good rest was called into the hotel parlor for tea. There, with ten or twelve other guests and helpers, I had my first cup of black tea. I thought it was awful but the friendly welcome made me forget the bad taste.

"On Saturday my father came. He had a small load of supplies to take out but, as freighters were not allowed to leave on Sunday, he got permission from the police and a warning to get started early before someone objected.

"He was driving two horses hitched to a wagon, leading one to change off as either of the others tired. We covered fifteen miles that day - up and down and round about. We spent the night at a 'stopping house'. The accommodation was very simple although the welcome was genuine.

"The next morning on again - twenty-five miles to Stauffer. We hadn't gone far when we had to ford a creek. Dad said, 'Hang on' and in we plunged. The water ran into the wagon box but we managed to reach the other side. I was not accustomed to long trips in the open and by that night had a glorious sunburn which lasted a week or more.

"At Stauffer my mother was waiting and after two very pleasant days we started for home, another twenty-five miles. All went well until about seven miles from our destination, where we had to ford another creek. When nearly across the wagon stuck in the mud. My father helped us out and my mother and I went up the hill to a homesteader's shack. Here we found the owner who helped to unload the wagon and



get it on higher ground. The supplies were covered with canvas as it had started to rain. We all stayed there for two days; in the morning of the third day we started on. The ground was very soft and once we tipped over on apparently level ground. About a mile from home another creek had to be forded. This time my father decided to cross alone and it is well that he did as the horses almost found it necessary to swim before they were across.

"My mother and I followed a ridge between the river and the creek for about quarter of a mile. It led down to the road beside the river where my father met us and took us home."

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(5) Interview with Mrs. Martin Borstad, Rocky Mountain House,  
April, 1952.

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Although by 1911 rural development of the Rocky Mountain House area was proceeding rapidly, many farmers were dissatisfied with the regulations laid down by the Dominion Government in respect to homesteading. George Thomson, a staunch Conservative and editor of the first newspaper in the district, exaggerated the discontent of the settlers through the columns of the "Echo", asserting that the land policy of Laurier's Liberal Government was actually impeding western settlement.

It was certainly reasonable that each homesteader be required to live on his quarter section for at least six months of every year, but those settlers who entered the country without cash or equipment feared that they would not, within a period of three years, be able to build a habitable house, dig a well, break thirty acres of land, crop twenty acres twice, fence eighty acres and at the same time provide a living for



their families. It was rightly felt that the conditions should be less exacting in those areas where the terrain was rocky, marshy or timbered, for preparing thirty acres under such circumstances was obviously a more strenuous task than breaking a field of equal size on the open prairie. In the grasslands a homesteader of the previous summer might have thirty or forty acres of land in crop, perhaps a patch of spring breaking seeded in flax, and the assurance of sufficient feed for his stock during the winter. At Rocky Mountain House the settlers whose farms were heavily wooded could hope to clear only a few acres yearly, and machine farming was impossible until the large roots and stumps had been removed from the land. True, the pioneer in this region had abundant fuel and building material which the prairie settler lacked, but these advantages were small in comparison with the rapid production of cash crops and the superior marketing facilities that the latter enjoyed. In open country produce could be hauled to the nearest railway over trails which would not suffice in the rough and marshy terrain of the forest belt.

Dissatisfaction over the Homestead Regulations gradually increased in the settlement as more people took up land. During the spring of 1912 a petition signed by nearly 500 men was sent to the Honourable Robert Rogers, Minister of the Interior, requesting that the acreage to be broken be reduced from thirty acres to fifteen acres in wooded districts. In his reply to the petitioners the Minister drew their attention to a provision in the Regulations which the settlers had not





been aware of: "Where homesteaders are unable to meet the requirements by reason of woods, rock or the broken character of the surface, the area required may be reduced, and the application for patent will be taken subject to acceptance by the Agent and Department after a homestead Inspector has visited the land and reported; but inspections of this kind are not made prior to the application for patent." (6)

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(6) The "Echo", Rocky Mountain House, May 21, 1912.

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In practice the Land Agent at Red Deer was lenient, frequently accepting smaller acreages than the law specified and passing as habitable residences which were little more than shacks. If the homesteader could show that he had made reasonable progress during the three-year period, he had no difficulty in obtaining his patent.

As the community grew a trading centre developed about half a mile below the mouth of the Clearwater River on the east bank of the Saskatchewan. A number of business establishments sprang up near the camp of the Alberta Central Railway which in 1910 had started work on a railroad bridge at this point. Although the citizens of the unofficial hamlet were not entirely satisfied with its site and haphazard plan, it grew rapidly during 1910 and 1911. The "Echo", founded on February 4, 1910, was one of the earliest enterprises. In April, 1911, W. Fraser and H. L. Gaetz opened a general store and their business grew so rapidly that within one year they had to enlarge the building on three different occasions to accommodate their customers. Soon afterwards Mr. H. C. Turnbull from Bowden started a jewellery counter in the



Fraser and Gaetz store, moving later into larger premises a short distance away. On May 20 of the same year the first automobile to be seen at Prairie Grange arrived from Red Deer. It was a McLaughlin Buick, Model 17, and was driven by A. C. Williams, accompanied by two ambitious businessmen, J. H. Driscoll and W. J. Kirby, both from Calgary. They set up a store in a large tent, while a frame building and warehouse was being constructed. During the spring a boarding house was opened by Mrs. J. Olson, and Paul Paulson, formerly of Morningside, erected two large tents to which he gave the name "Rocky Mountain House Hotel". A short while later he built a large frame building in order to provide better service for railroad builders and travellers. Messrs. Chalmers and Lundy opened the first restaurant, but finding the premises rather small, they enlarged the dining space and at the same time built a rooming house and public hall above. Sam Creighton came from Lacombe to open a barber shop in the poolroom at Rocky Mountain House, and the "Echo" referred to him as "a first-class hair and whisker artist". Mr. C. L. McLean, who had been on the engineering staff of the Alberta Central Railway Company, felt such confidence in the future of this district that he resigned his position in order to launch a real estate and insurance business. The first drug-store was owned by Mr. A. E. Pepper of Lacombe, and it was advertised in the paper that he had "an up to date stock of drugs, patent medicines and toilet requisites" as well as a good supply of "horse and veterinary medicines". (7) The

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(7) The "Echo", August 8, 1911.



OLD TOWN



Old Town as it appeared before many of its buildings were moved to the new site.



The only relic of the original stores  
at Old Town.





OLD TOWN TODAY



Old Town is now a residential  
suburb of  
Rocky Mountain House.



latter drugs were needed to combat the swamp fever that was prevalent in this area. He later sold out to Dr. A. H. Brown, the hamlet's first doctor, who had been employed by the Canadian Northern Railway Company. The first blacksmith to reach the forks since the closing of the fort in 1875 was F. E. Good. His services were in great demand, for horses needed shoeing and ploughshares had to be exceedingly sharp to cut through tough roots and turn new soil. William McLennan built the first livery, feed and sale stable, which the farmers found most convenient in winter. Two more livery barns later appeared, insuring that all teams could be adequately accommodated. Teams and vehicles were also available for renting.

In 1911 Mr. L. G. Taylor, who like several others came from Lacombe, became the first Dominion Land Agent at Rocky Mountain House. It was now unnecessary to travel the great distance to Red Deer to settle homesteading affairs. Mr. Taylor also acted as Justice of the Peace and at the same time embarked upon a real estate, loan and insurance business.

This rapidly growing settlement required capable builders and it found them in E. R. Hill and J. E. Nordstrom, two contractors whom the editor of the local paper described frequently as "hustlers". They owned a saw mill and were therefore able to build homes directly from the log. There was also a lumber yard in the community, operated by Messrs. Martin and MacDougall, from which private builders could procure their supplies.



On October 3, 1911, the "Echo" announced that Wm. J. Kirby had written to the Inspector of the Imperial Bank of Canada informing him the hamlet had grown to such an extent that it required a bank. Not long afterwards a branch was opened and Mr. W. M. Sellens was appointed manager.

The rapid growth of an urban centre prompted optimistic business men to give serious thought to the selection of an official location for the great metropolis which they envisaged would emerge on the banks of the upper Saskatchewan. They felt that on its original site the future expansion of Rocky Mountain House would be limited by the river on the west and the ravine on the south. After much debate about whether the town should be on the west or on the east side of the Saskatchewan River, an adventuresome group of settlers formed the Central Alberta Townsite Company. Although practically penniless, they promptly made arrangements to purchase a new site. Because of its high elevation and good drainage, "its accessibility to the greatest number of settlers" (8) and (8) Rocky Mountain House Guide, August 29, 1913.

probably the fine view of the Rocky Mountains to the northwest, John Henry Bertrand's homestead was selected. For this fractional quarter, consisting of 127 acres of land, and lying on the east side of the river about one and a half miles from the mouth of the Clearwater, the Townsite Company agreed to give Mr. Bertrand the amazing sum of \$10,160.00, two hundred and fifty dollars of which was to be paid at once. It was optimistically believed that the remainder of the purchase price would be raised through the sale of lots. (9)

(9) See appendix for copy of original agreement.





THE HAMLET AND THE VILLAGE



Rocky Mountain House on the official site,  
1912.



Rocky Mountain House as a village (the date is  
missing).



THE TOWN



Rocky Mountain House Today.  
The mountains are visible in the background.



Thomas Daniel Green, a full-blooded Indian born on the famous Six-Nation Reserve at Brantford, Ontario, surveyed the townsite. A graduate of McGill University, he held certificates as a Dominion and Alberta Land Surveyor, and had been associated with a number of historic surveys including Fort Ellice Trail in Manitoba and various mining claims in the Yukon during the Gold Rush of 1898. He also surveyed the townships in the Rocky Mountain House area in 1906. He finally settled on a homestead east of Rocky Mountain House but later moved into the village where he took an active interest in local affairs until the time of his death in 1935.

After surveying and subdividing the land, the purchasers submitted their plan to the Registrar for the North Alberta Land Registration District. The lots were placed on sale on February 27, 1912, and George Thomson marked the occasion by issuing "The Townsite Special". In it he listed "Nine of the 1001 Reasons" for buying property at Rocky Mountain House. The arguments, apart from the customary comments on the scenic beauty of the region, were economic. The Canadian Northern Railway and the Alberta Central were at this time building parallel lines toward the hamlet in a race to the Brazeau Collieries. It was generally believed that at least one of these roads would in a short time be a trans-continental line. With the knowledge that the Panama Canal would soon be opened to traffic, many people thought that most of the prairie wheat and livestock would be hauled to the Pacific Coast for shipment to Europe. The editor indicated, too, that the town was advantageously situated at





the confluence of two rivers whose headwaters flowed through millions of feet of virgin timber. It was also in the midst of an infant, but thriving, dairying and mixed farming region. The most attractive feature of Rocky Mountain House appears to have been its position midway between the business centres of the province and the large deposits of coal in the Brazeau area which German capital was preparing to exploit. "This place is going to grow very fast," stated the "Echo", "from the day the first lots go on the market; a month ago we thought 5000 people, now we figure on no less than at least 40,000 in the next ten years." (10)

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(10) The "Echo" June 3, 1911.

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The property sold rapidly in the beginning for the merchants in general had given the scheme their blessing, and were now anxious to establish themselves on the new site as quickly as possible. Skids were placed under the buildings so that horses could pull them more easily and with less danger of damage. Most of the business residences withdrew to the official site, but "old town", as it became known, did not disappear. It is in fact a residential suburb of Rocky Mountain House proper; Levi Smith, one of the earliest homesteaders, still resides there at the ripe age of eighty-six.

Rocky Mountain House now stands as a substantial tribute to those enterprising citizens who were not afraid to invest in its future, but the venture from a financial point of view was not successful. No one ever grew rich from the sale of lots and Mr. Bertrand in particular was burdened by the investment.



Mr. Skinner, the editor of the "Guide" which in 1912 had replaced the "Echo", blamed the slow sale of lots on the Canadian Pacific Railway. "Upon several occasions," he wrote on November 21, 1913, "the Townsite Company offered one half of the remaining lots to the Canadian Pacific Railway as a gift. The Company refused them, but acquired the quarter section adjoining on the west, on which they have announced their intention of surveying a townsite and establishing a station." These rumours retarded the sale of lots, for the uncertainty that shrouded the location of the station caused many prospective purchasers to bide their time. As it turned out, the Canadian Pacific Railway Company ultimately abandoned the idea of founding a second town, although a station was built called Lochearn. To avoid confusion the Company later adopted the name Rocky Mountain House.

Despite early difficulties and frustrations the hamlet rapidly reached the status of a village, receiving notification of its incorporation from the Department of Municipal Affairs on May 2, 1913. The first elections for the village council were held one month later, and Mr. H. L. Gaetz, one of the pioneer merchants, became the first mayor.

The Council was immediately embarrassed by lack of funds as approximately two-thirds of the village was owned by the Townsite Company which had not paid taxes on the grounds that its only returns came from the sale of lots. On March 13, 1914, Mr. J. H. Bertrand felt obliged to shoulder the liabilities of the bankrupt company. Since the village would not relinquish its right to claim taxes, he agreed to pay the sum of \$1500.00 which was owing on the property,



and in this way made the lots a more attractive investment. (11)

(11) Rocky Mountain House Guide, March 13, 1914.

John H. Bertrand, who died at the age of 82 on February 17, 1932, deserves more than any other person to be recognized as the founder of Rocky Mountain House. His original home is still standing and is occupied by his granddaughter. It should be preserved as a memorial to one of the town's finest pioneers.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The pioneer community around Rocky Mountain House began in a mood of optimism during a period when homesteading and railroad building possessed an irresistible appeal. Blessed with the triple resources of land, lumber and coal, the people of this district believed the extravagant predictions uttered by railroad officials and editors relevant to the future prosperity of their settlement. The following passage from the "Echo" reveals the sentiment that prevailed at this time: "Rocky Mountain House is the gateway to the Brazeau coal fields. Settlers can depend upon a ready market for all and more than they can produce and the home market is always the best; you don't have to kick about freight rates on stuff you have to sell. Five railways will enter Rocky Mountain House from the east side of the river within the next five years. There is a future before us!" (1)

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(1) The "Echo" Rocky Mountain House, June 3, 1911.

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By the spring of 1911 many homesteaders had small areas of land under cultivation; fencing had begun and cattle raising, though still in its infancy, was developing steadily. Yet farm produce could not be marketed until the country was served with better transportation facilities. Roads and a railway were essential to the community's growth, and the settlers clamoured for both continually. In 1911 there was at last real hope that the main route into the settlement would soon be improved. "We are informed by Mr. E. Michener, M.P.P.," wrote George Thomson, "that the Government intends



to grade the road from Emberley's Corner to the Clearwater early next summer. This will make a good road from Red Deer to Rocky Mountain House." (2) The side trails, however, re-

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(2) The "Echo", Feb. 18, 1911.

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mained inadequate for many years. Even now, during spring thaw and rainy weather, they present a serious problem to those farmers who do not live near the David Thompson highway.

While the people awaited the coming of steel, George Brewster of Bowden started a stage service between Rocky Mountain House and Red Deer, and the maiden trip was begun on December 4, 1911, by Ira Gray, the son of Thomas Gray. The former still resides in the district. The stage left the hamlet at 6:30 a.m. on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, and arrived at Red Deer the same evening. Return journeys began at the same hour on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Both passengers and parcels were carried each way. This service, the forerunner of the bus, was typical of pioneer resourcefulness.

The railroad facilities improved in a spectacular manner, but not because the railway companies were concerned about the isolation of the settlers. The spirit of rivalry which had prevailed in this region during the fur trade was suddenly rekindled by the discovery of large coal deposits near Nordegg. Early in 1910 two companies, the Canadian Northern and the Alberta Central, decided to build competitive lines toward Rocky Mountain House, each hoping to monopolize the Brazeau coal trade. The road of the former was a continuation of the branch that passed through Alix



and Mirror to the north-east and crossed the Edmonton-Calgary railway several miles south of Blackfalds. The Alberta Central began at Red Deer and this town, hoping to benefit from the rich hinterland that lay to the west, gave the project its moral support. The "Echo", though favouring the Canadian Northern Company, cheered on both contestants, giving praise when progress was rapid but condemning them vehemently when activity abated. The early pioneers had always felt confident that steel would follow them in a few years, but the prospect of two competing railroads was beyond their earlier expectations. They were quite prepared nevertheless to make the most of this happy situation. The railway boom provided capital and employment at a time when both were greatly needed, and was largely responsible for the rapid growth of a village.

As early as 1910 the Alberta Central Railway Company had employed the Dominion Steel and Bridge Company to construct a bridge across the North Saskatchewan River at a point three-quarters of a mile below the mouth of the Clearwater. Meanwhile the Canadian Northern concentrated on road building, reaching Sylvan Lake before its competitor had even completed a survey. By the end of 1911 it had laid tracks to within one mile of Rocky Mountain House.

Behind in the race, the Alberta Central made valiant efforts to overtake its energetic rival. On April 1, 1911, President J. T. Moore and Chief Engineer J. Grant McGregor awarded to James McDonald and Company a contract for one hundred miles of grading and ballasting on the proposed Alberta Central road for a distance of 64 miles west of Red





Deer and 36 miles east. (3) At a cost of \$25,000.00 per

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(3) The line east of Red Deer was not completed.

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mile this contract amounted to the considerable sum of \$2,500,000.00, and the work was to be completed by the end of August.

It was at this time that the Scotsman, Mr. McGregor, broached the idea of giving the name Loch Ernie or Lochearn to the flourishing hamlet at the forks. The local paper offered only mild criticism on this occasion: "It is a suitable name in a way as Lake Ernie is just two miles east but it is not much like the beautiful lochs in Scotland." (4)

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(4) The "Echo", April 1, 1911.

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Indeed, the lake referred to was no more than a large slough.

At Rocky Mountain House the two railway lines drew together. Here the right-of-way granted to the Alberta Central permitted this company to build a grade that cut across the proposed route of its competitor. This unusual situation set the stage for a travesty which brought railroad building to a standstill and entertained the settlers for several months. Although their steel had not yet reached Rocky Mountain House, construction gangs employed by the Alberta Central Company began to erect barricades on both sides of the Saskatchewan River in an attempt to halt the rapid advance of the other company. Without hint of violence Canadian Northern men simply removed the barriers during the night. Between Ferrier and Ullen, on the north side of the river, they also dumped ground from their higher grade on that of the Alberta Central Railway, which was lower and running parallel. In



this way "both outfits began playing leapfrog with stretches of track clear on to Horburg", (5) a distance of sixteen miles.

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(5) Robert E. Gard, JOHNNY CHINOOK (London: Longmans, 1945)  
p.219.

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Ultimately tiring of the game, the Alberta Central Railway Company sought to obtain an injunction against the other company. In 1912 the controversy was settled by the Railway Commission which decided that only one bridge was needed at Rocky Mountain House, and the Alberta Central was favoured in this respect as it had already commenced construction. This company, on the other hand, was ordered to end its steel at Ullen, several miles west of Rocky Mountain House on the north side of the river, while the Canadian Northern, having laid the greater length of track west of Red Deer, was permitted to continue on to Nordegg. According to the arrangements made by the Commission, the Canadian Northern Railway Company was permitted to use the Alberta Central bridge and track up to Ullen for which the latter company was recompensed.

The Canadian Northern Railroad reached Rocky Mountain House in the middle of June, 1912, well in advance of the Alberta Central line. John Henry Bertrand was given the honour of driving the last spike while over three hundred people looked on. George Thomson, who had bet Mr. Galbraith, the editor of the Red Deer Advocate, "his hat" that the Canadian Northern Railroad would win the race, was jubilant as his favourite company lived up to his great expectations. To mark the occasion he wrote some doggerel verse which



THE LAST SPIKE



John H. Bertrand drives the last spike in  
the Canadian Northern Railroad at Rocky  
Mountain House, June, 1912.





appeared in the "Echo":

Did you ever hear of the Great C.N.R.?  
The railroad that earned its renown  
By the way it goes forging its way through  
The West and linking up village and town.

They're bound to be first, at the Brazeau Mines,  
And beat J. T. Moore at a walk;  
And show the A.C. that they're miles in the rear,  
And you can't build railroads with talk.

The A.C.R. tried with injunctions and fines  
To stop all the C.N.R. haddone:  
But now it's all over, the train is right here,  
And so the C.N.R. won.

When you ride in a nice Pullman car,  
And go to the Lake (Sylvan) for a trip,  
Just remember the C.N.R. is top dog  
And the A.C.R. has got whipped.

There's never a wind that don't blow for good,  
You can always be sure about that;  
The Advocate's lost and it's up to the boss  
To send G. T. Thomson his hat.

Though dubious from a literary point of view, these lines are interesting because of the references to the railway controversy and the suggestion that a mild rivalry existed between Red Deer and Rocky Mountain House.

On July 2, 1912, George Thomson expressed his kindly feeling toward "The Advocate" and its editor for having honoured the bet. When Mr. Galbraith heard that the Canadian Northern steel had reached Rocky Mountain House, he sent an order to Fraser and Gaetz to fit out the editor of the "Echo" with the best hat in their store.

Meanwhile the Alberta Central construction gang continued to push slowly westward. By January 3, 1913, practically all of the grading on the road leading to Rocky Mountain House was finished, and tracks laid to a point fifteen miles west of Red Deer. At the same time the bridge



was nearing completion. This structure was ready for use on June 26, 1913. It was an important link not only between Rocky Mountain House and Nordegg, but also between the two communities lying on opposite sides of the high river banks. When the ferry could not be operated, and when the river ice was dangerous to cross, this bridge provided the only means by which pedestrians and teamsters could reach the village from the north.

The second railway entered Rocky Mountain House in 1914, just prior to the outbreak of the First World War. In this year the Alberta Central Railway was absorbed by the larger Canadian Pacific Company. The new road, which had been created under the direction of J. T. Moore, was informally opened on Monday, August 17. The Maintenance Department of the Canadian Pacific Railway took over the line from the Construction Department, and the first train was run west and east to inaugurate the regular tri-weekly service. A mixed train, freight and passengers, left the Red Deer station at 12:30 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays. It reached Lochearn station (later Rocky Mountain House) at 4:00 p.m. and returned the same day. Later in that month Mr. Donlevey, the energetic Canadian Pacific Railway agent at Red Deer, provided an excursion on the occasion of the Red Deer Fair. A special train consisting of five standard coaches carried people from the western region to Red Deer. Lochearn Station, built by the Alberta Central, accommodated both companies which were now following a more cooperative policy.



Mail was still being carried by team to the village as late as July 31, 1914. On this day "The Guide" announced that the Post Office Inspector at Calgary, Mr. D. A. Bruce, had informed the editor by letter that "mail service by train to Rocky Mountain House is now engaging the attention of the Railway Mail Service Branch."

The Canadian Northern Railway Company, being more interested in reaching the Collieries than starting a regular train service for Rocky Mountain House, had by October 10, 1913, laid rails to a point thirty-three miles beyond the station of Lochearn. It hoped to reach the Brazeau mines by the end of that year. It was already common knowledge that the Dominion Government would soon take over this branch. (6)

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(6) "The Guide", July 11, 1913.

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The citizens of Rocky Mountain House could no longer complain about the lack of railway facilities, but their dream that one line at least would eventually become part of a trans-continental line passing through historic Howse Pass, or else be connected with the Canadian National Road through Yellowhead Pass, never materialized. By the end of 1914 railroad fever had subsided, and common sense indicated that it was uneconomical to extend the steel beyond Nordegg. Today two companies continue to provide a tri-weekly service to Rocky Mountain House, but only the Canadian National Company sends freight and passenger trains to Nordegg.

It was coal, more than farming or lumbering, which had fired the imaginations of settlers and railroad interests,





and raised hopes that were never fully realized. Brazeau coal "classed as low volatile bituminous in rank", (7) and

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(7) J.A.Allan, COAL AREAS OF ALBERTA, Research Council of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, 1943, p.174.

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suitable for locomotive engines, was first exploited by Brazeau Collieries Limited, an organization financed by German capital. This company obtained control of 10,000 acres of coal lands near the southern headwaters of the Brazeau River, approximately sixty miles west of Rocky Mountain House. Development of the field was begun in 1911, before a single track had been laid on the north side of the Saskatchewan. A mining camp was established on the property; this settlement later became known as Nordegg, after Martin Nordegg, the company's geologist and first president, who reputedly surveyed the original field. John Shanks, who was formerly manager of the Coal Creek Mines of the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company, became general manager of the Brazeau Collieries in 1914. He held this position until September, 1945, and died in Calgary five months after his retirement.

During 1911 the Saunders Creek Coal Company was also preparing for production a smaller deposit of bituminous coal forty miles west of Rocky Mountain House. As soon as the Canadian Northern Railroad reached the mines at Saunders and Brazeau, coal began to be produced in large quantities principally for steam purposes. These fields, though valuable, did not become the most important in Alberta. For example, during 1941 and 1942 coal mined at Nordegg fell far short of the annual output at such centres as Crowsnest,



Drumheller, Mountain Park, Coalspur and even Edmonton. (8)

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(8) Ibid, Table 3, p.167.

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Today coal trains continue to pass through Rocky Mountain House, but the market has suffered appreciably owing to the increasing use of the Diesel locomotive which in a few years will entirely replace the steam engine on Canadian and American railways.

The significance of the Brazeau and Saunders mines to the economic growth of the Rocky Mountain House area lay not so much in the coal trade itself as in the location of the fields west of the town. They inspired the railroad boom that had both temporary and far-reaching effects on the life of the community. In 1911 a discerning land agent reported: "Considerable railway development took place during the past year, but 1911 promises to be phenomenal in railway construction throughout the district. Construction work on the Alberta Central and Canadian Northern Railways west from Red Deer, which was carried on all winter, has given employment to a large number of settlers. These companies have paid good wages and have purchased all kinds of produce that the farmers had to sell, which has made good times generally. Many new towns are springing up, and the older towns are growing rapidly, consequently there is a heavy demand for all kinds of skilled labour. The building of the railways to the West has given an impetus to settlement in that portion of the district, which formerly was neglected on account of lack of transportation facilities. Butter and cheese making, which is an important factor in the life of the farmer in



this district, is steadily increasing and the earnings of the factories have been above the calculations of the most optimistic." (9)

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(9) Arthur S. Morton and Chester Martin, HISTORY OF PRAIRIE SETTLEMENT AND "DOMINION LANDS" POLICY, Toronto, 1938, Vol.11, p.143.

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The coming of two railroads to Rocky Mountain House assured the advancement of both mixed farming and lumbering, the basic industries of the area. From an economic standpoint, the stockyards and the Atlas planing mill are undoubtedly the most important establishments in the town.

Farming has become the most extensive occupation in the Rocky Mountain House district, yet throughout the greater part of the fur trading period this region was considered incapable of producing anything but small potatoes. It was not, of course, in the interests of the trading companies to attract settlers to the North-West with rosy reports of its agricultural possibilities; nevertheless the records of the fur traders cannot be entirely discredited. While kitchen gardens and cereal crops were usually successful around Fort Edmonton and Fort Carlton, they seldom reached maturity at Rocky Mountain House. As early as 1810 Alexander Henry wrote: "The soil in general is sand, covered with thin black mold which I do not suppose would answer for agriculture. Gardens have been made at this place [Rocky Mountain House] but have never produced anything worth the trouble. Potatoes are the only things that come to maturity. The climate is too inconstant for gardening. In the daytime the heat is excessive, but no sooner has the sun set than the weather becomes chilly, with





a white frost almost throughout the summer." (10)

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(10) Coues, p.700.

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Apparently the Hudson's Bay people experienced similar disappointments in their horticultural pursuits at this post. In 1821 Francis Heron reported: "... At the Rocky Mountain House a small space of ground was last year planted with potatoes and Barley, the whole of which were destroyed by severe frosts which are common in the vicinity of these vast mountains at all times in the summer." (11)

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(11) Report on the Edmonton District, 1820-21, by Francis Heron, H.B.C. Archives, London.

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The Select Committee of 1857 was keenly interested in the agricultural prospects of Rupert's Land, and as a result of its inquiries Captain John Palliser and his botanist, Dr. Hector, were instructed to report on the country. The latter visited Rocky Mountain House in January, 1858, and the following comment reveals how sharply his outlook differed from that of the early fur traders; "Sometimes before abandoning the fort in the spring, the Company's servants have planted potatoes and sown barley and turnips, and what was left by the Indians of the resulting crop until their return in the autumn, was sufficient to prove that the soil and climate are very favourable to agriculture. Every day we had here soft winds from the west, which cause a rise in the thermometer, sometimes to even above the freezing point, and the winter is said to be always much milder and the spring earlier than at places further to eastward." (12)

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(12) Annual Report, 1886, Vol.11, p.53e.

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Dr.Hector appears to have been unduly influenced by the balmy chinook which the fort experienced during his stay, for his report was excessively optimistic. At that time there was no grain that matured early enough to escape the frost hazard at Rocky Mountain House.

The first accurate soils survey of this region was begun in 1950 by the Soils Department at the University of Alberta, and progressive farmers will soon be able to obtain the resulting information free of charge from the Department of Agriculture. In addition to small areas of black loam, four types of soil have been identified in the vicinity of Rocky Mountain House. Of these only the grey wooded and the Codner half-bog soil are practicable for cultivation. The former, though inferior to the rich earth of the park belt, can be greatly improved by use of fertilizer containing sulphur and by growing legumes. The half-bog soils are those in which the peat is not too deep to prevent the roots of common crop plants from penetrating the underlying mineral soil. Such areas can produce coarse grains and forage crops. The podselized grey wooded soil, which has developed for the longest period of time under forest conditions, is usually leached to a much greater extent than the other types of soil. It is found in the sandy areas west of Rocky Mountain House and south of Cow Lake, and is unsuitable for agriculture, although it produces blueberries in abundance. Another type of soil, known as sedge-peat bog, occurs in poorly drained places. These muskegs are often covered with a shrubby growth of Labrador tea, and frequently there is a scattered growth



of small conifers consisting of spruce and tamarack. The average farmer cannot afford to drain such lands. If the peat layer is burnt, too little organic matter is left to provide a good seed bed. Yet, in spite of the large area of unproductive land around Rocky Mountain House, there is enough good soil to support a permanent agricultural community. (13)

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(13) Interviews with Mr. Peters, Soils Department, University of Alberta, July, 1951, and May, 1952.

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The growing season begins on approximately April 30 and ceases toward the end of September. The short frost-free period, only 48 days as compared to 98 at Edmonton and 95 at Olds, still makes grain growing hazardous and prevents the maturing of late vegetables. On the other hand, the farmers seldom complain of drought, as the rainfall is well above the provincial average. The rainfall from April to October inclusive is about sixteen inches. Hay, pasture and fodder crops are usually plentiful, enabling farmers to depend primarily on livestock for their existence.

The pioneer settlers in this region soon discovered its climatic limitations, but by this time early maturing grains and vegetables had been developed, making it possible for them to engage in mixed farming. Progress was slow, however, until the advent of the railroad. Martin Borstad was one of the first farmers to purchase a binder. His machine was a John Deer model; it could be pulled by three horses and cut a six-foot swath. Threshing did not commence until autumn of 1913, when William Ellenburgh brought in a thresher by rail. Hitherto grain had been cut for green feed, but in





this year many farmers allowed their grain to ripen. Ellenburgh's threshing machine, run by a stationary, eight horsepower engine, introduced a new era in farming operations at Rocky Mountain House. The greatest acreage was usually devoted to oats but barley, wheat, timothy, alfalfa and clover were also popular crops. Most farmers considered it more profitable to feed the bulk of their grain to cattle and swine, as the damp atmosphere and frosts frequently harmed the quality of the kernels. Until 1932 there was no elevator in the district, and any grain that was sold was handled by local buyers who loaded it directly on box cars. There is now only one elevator, the Midland Pacific, at Rocky Mountain House, an indication that stock raising and dairying are still predominant in this region.

In 1914 there were less than one hundred milk cows in the district, (14) while at least four hundred were con-  
(14) "The Guide", August 14, 1914.

sidered necessary to support a local creamery. Cattle were expensive and most farmers did not have enough feed to keep many through the winter. It was realized that more land would have to be brought under cultivation in order to maintain larger herds. Meanwhile people in the village were supplied with fresh milk and cream by Alfred Brockman who had one of the largest herds of milk cows. Several years later the Lochearn Creamery began to serve the increasing dairying industry until it was totally destroyed in 1922 during one of the village's frequent fires. Dairy produce then had to be shipped to Red Deer. Two years later Central



AN EARLY CROP



Mr. and Mrs. John H. Bertrand and  
one of their early crops.



Creameries Limited opened a branch at Rocky Mountain House under the able management of Mr. J. Plathan, who started and for many years trained the Boys' Band. In 1927 his creamery made 112,000 pounds of butter, 40,000 pounds of which were sold locally. He became a specialist in butter-making and frequently his samples won distinction in exhibitions throughout Canada. (15)

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(15) "The Mountaineer", Rocky Mountain House, March 2, 1927.

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By 1925 stock raising had increased to such an extent that it was necessary to have a stock car service every two weeks. The Central Alberta Farmers' Co-operative Marketing Association, located in Red Deer, began to send a buyer to Rocky Mountain House, and he accepted all the animals that the farmers wished to sell, paying in cash a price which was one cent off the figure quoted on the Calgary market for that particular day. In 1929 the local paper indicated that the Medicine Valley Co-operative Livestock Marketing Association, which had its head office in Eckville, was doing an increasing business in hogs, sometimes shipping two carloads in one day from Rocky Mountain House. (16) Be-

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(16) Ibid, June 26, 1929.

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fore the day of trucking, cattle were herded into town and pigs were usually hauled to market by wagon. Now livestock is trucked into the town stockyards or else taken all the way to Calgary.

The founding of an Agricultural Society in the summer of 1913, under the Alberta Agricultural Fairs Association, encouraged better farming practices. It endeavoured to promote improved methods in the breeding, care and feeding of





all types of domestic animals, and in the growing of roots, grasses, grain and vegetables. The Society was also interested in the manufacturing of dairy products such as butter and cheese. Officers were elected in time to hold a fall fair, which became an important annual event at Rocky Mountain House. The Provincial Government supplied fifty per cent of all prize money paid out each year. In addition to the government grant, money was raised through membership fees and donations from local merchants. Prizes were given for the best exhibits which included everything from livestock to home cooking. The Fair engendered a competitive spirit, inspiring many members to purchase purebred poultry, cattle and other farm animals. In 1914 Howard Ringrose, a Prairie Creek farmer, obtained a purebred Holstein bull and in the same year T. E. Edey brought in Barred Plymouth Rocks and White Leghorns, Bruce Williams purchased a number of White Orpingtons, and A. J. Pingrey started a flock of Rhode Island Reds. (17) In time other farmers acquired improved

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(17) "The Guide", March 20, 1914.

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breeds of poultry. Peter Grant, who was noted in the district for his superior exhibits, secured a yearling Hampshire ram from the University of Alberta in 1930. The careful breeding carried on by enterprising farmers encouraged others to follow their example and in this way the quality of livestock was gradually raised. Although not always as active as in its earlier years, the Agricultural Society continued to function until the beginning of World War II. It still owns property in the town but interest in the Fall Fair has died.



With vigorous leadership the Society could once more become a useful institution at Rocky Mountain House.

The lumbering industry, though secondary to agriculture, has also been of considerable importance to the prosperity of the community. It is dependent upon the extensive stands of spruce and pine lying west of the town, up to and including the Clearwater Forest Reserve. Before Rocky Mountain House existed as a hamlet, Red Deer was the chief centre for the lumbering operations in this region of Alberta. The planing mill of the Great West Lumber Company was located in the town. Later Rocky Mountain House, situated closer to the forest area, emerged as the principal centre. In 1913 the Phoenix Lumber Company, a subsidiary of the Burrows Lumber Company in Manitoba, set up an office in the village and remained there for twenty-three years. A number of smaller concerns also engaged in lumbering. Messrs. McDougall and Martin operated a saw mill and in 1914 supplied the Tremble and Garland Lumber Company in Lacombe with 450,000 feet of lumber. (18) Walsh Brothers

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(18) "The Guide", March 28, 1914.

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and Wright likewise owned a local mill and their first contract was to supply 200,000 feet of squared timbers for the Alberta Central Railway bridge. (19) Gradually Phoenix

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(19) The "Echo", May 6, 1911.

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either absorbed or hired most of the smaller outfits. Until the Atlas Company entered the district, it faced very little competition. According to "The Guide" the Phoenix Company in 1912 had obtained a lease on 110 square miles of timber along the Saskatchewan and Clearwater Rivers. Mr. Michener,



M.P.P. for the Red Deer Constituency which at that time included Rocky Mountain House, criticized the Dominion Government's policy of letting large companies monopolize such vast areas of timber. (20)

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(20) "The Guide", July 15, 1912.

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Besides lumber for construction, mining timbers, and poles for telephone lines and other purposes, ties were produced in large quantities. They were needed for the expansion and maintenance of tracks in the West. During February, 1921, the Phoenix Company hauled about ten thousand ties daily to Horburg where they were taken out by rail.

The Atlas Lumber Company came to Rocky Mountain House in 1923, buying out the Smith Lumber Company located in the village. It already had yards at Sylvan Lake, Lacombe, Bentley, Eckville and Rimbey, with head office in Calgary. Like the Alberta Lumber Company, it is now a subsidiary of the Revelstoke Saw mills, a vast organization which owns and supplies with lumber seventy yards scattered throughout Alberta and Saskatchewan. A large Atlas planing mill was opened at Rocky Mountain House in 1929 and this establishment provided work during seasons when many lumber men were unemployed. Logs cannot be cut while the sap is flowing, but winter-cut logs can be sawn and planed in the summer months. They are usually "rough sawn" in the bush and then hauled by truck to the planing mill where the finished lumber is produced.

After 1936 the Atlas Company, except for the activities of several smaller concerns, had a clear field.





THE ATLAS PLANING MILL AND LUMBER YARD  
AT ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE





In this year the Phoenix Company at last ceased operations owing to financial difficulties. "The Mountaineer" announced its departure with some regret: "The buildings at Phoenix saw mill site are rapidly being torn down. All winter long machinery has been loaded and shipped, and soon there will be nothing left of this big concern except a memory. Jake Lewis is in charge of operations for the Machinery Depot Limited, Calgary, which bought the property. It seems too bad that the Phoenix people had to suspend operations. Their methods may have been open to criticism but just the same when they were running they gave employment to hundreds of men and the mill crew alone numbered about one hundred and fifty." (21)

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(21) "The Mountaineer", March 18, 1936.

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The Atlas Company followed the practice of letting out generous contracts to local lumber men, as well as hiring people in the district to assist in operating several saw mills of its own west of Rocky Mountain House. These policies and the location of its planing mill at Rocky Mountain House endeared the company to the town and community. Many people had come to rely upon it as their chief means of gaining a livelihood. On several occasions the citizens demonstrated their loyalty to this organization in an effective manner. In the winter of 1937 a difficulty arose as a result of the Minimum Wage Act which provided that in the lumber industry employees would receive an additional five cents an hour in centres containing 500 or more people, and within a ten mile



radius of such places. Much to the distress of the Atlas management the population of Rocky Mountain House, then between 500 and 1000, was large enough to place its workers on the new schedule. It was argued that the new regulation was unfair inasmuch as Atlas lumber would have to compete in the open market with the same produce coming from mills operating under almost identical conditions, but enjoying a lower minimum wage. Representations made to the Department of Trade and Industry by both the Company and the local Board of Trade, which was extremely anxious to have the mill remain in operation, resulted in a favourable revision in the regulation whereby only places with a population of 1000 or more were to be affected by the increased wage rate. More recently the Chamber of Commerce (formerly Board of Trade) succeeded in preventing the Imperial Lumber Company, which was considered an interloper, from securing an extensive timber berth west of Rocky Mountain House.

The lumber industry continues to thrive at this centre, enjoying an era of prosperity based on the great demands of post-war construction. The Atlas Company is the largest concern associated with the lumber industry of Rocky Mountain House, but the Imperial Lumber Company, which established a temporary office in the town during 1950, may offer the older company some competition in bidding for leases. At present some sawmills are operating less than twenty miles from the town, and there are still many acres of marketable timber in the Clearwater Forest Reserve and Chippewa Indian Reserve. It is, however, the considered





opinion of many residents that, if two large companies in addition to the several small outfits that exist compete in exploiting the western forest resource, Rocky Mountain House will lose its important lumber industry within a period of ten years. As lumbering declines, it is hoped that agriculture alone will be able to sustain the present level of development in the town and district.

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## CHAPTER NINE

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY LIFE

A frontier society emerged rapidly at Rocky Mountain House as various institutions began to shape and direct the social activities of the increasing population. In this development the press, the church and the school were of particular importance.

The function of the local newspaper was especially valuable during the period of settlement, for it, probably more than any other agency, raised the morale of the pioneer community. The editor recorded the progress of the settlement, suggested future objectives and in other ways helped to arouse interest in the district. By publicly recognizing their existence and labours, he also enhanced the settlers' individual sense of worth, and at the same time increased the circulation of his paper. Providing that the report was not disparaging, everyone liked to have his activities mentioned occasionally.

The original paper, called the "Echo", first appeared on Friday morning, February 4, 1910, and was delivered to subscribers through Prairie Grange Post Office. It was published by a group of settlers who dubbed themselves "The Canadian Uncle Sam Amusement Club". They were staunch Conservatives, and the editor, George Thomson, did not conceal their political bias from the general public. The professed motto of the "Echo" was "Live and Let Live", a slogan which Thomson's temperament sometimes contradicted. Poorly written



from a literary or grammatical point of view, the articles were nevertheless refreshing and full of local interest. No one can doubt after scanning its pages that this pioneer newspaper was thoroughly enjoyed by the majority of its readers who were not offended by spelling errors, slang expressions and faulty sentence structure.

In his recollections of pioneer days, published in "The Mountaineer", in 1945, George Thomson explains how the paper originated: "Early in 1910 a few of us thought it would be a great joke on the settlement to get out a newspaper. We had a box of changeable rubber type, an ink pad and a stamp which held four lines four and a half inches long. The type had to be put in and taken out of the stamp with a pair of small tweezers. You will quite understand that it was no small task to print fifty sheets with front and back pages, each containing two columns, but it passed the time during the long winter evenings of January. The heading or name 'Rocky Mountain House Echo' was carved with a jack-knife from a block of wood. We had no intention of getting out more than one issue as we knew very little about the printing business, and had no money to buy a plant." (1)

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(1) "The Mountaineer", Dec.19, 1945, p.1.

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There was an immediate demand for a regular issue of the "Echo". With this encouragement and an unexpected loan to cover the cost of a more adequate press, George Thomson, assisted by Harry Bertrand, decided to edit a larger semi-monthly paper. Many settlers helped by contributing news items concerning Rocky Mountain House and the surrounding





districts of Eckville, Stauffer, Dickson, Prairie Creek and Raven. Arthur Eckford, after whom Eckville was named, became the first correspondent.

Besides local advertisements and news, and borrowed items on Canadian and world affairs, it contained articles devoted to the early history and growth of the settlement. Occasionally the editor expounded his home-spun philosophy of life, one of his themes being "Wealth does not make for happiness". Views expressed in such homilies sometimes conflicted with his inordinate ambition in connection with the growth of Rocky Mountain House, and his great admiration of "hustling" business men. His worst fault appears to have been occasional vindictiveness. Especially unfortunate were his belittling remarks directed at ministers in general and at the student missionary, R. H. MacDonald, in particular. The latter, in opposition to a number of settlers who were inclined to disregard the sabbath, wished to keep Sunday as strictly a day of rest and worship. (2) On the other hand, (2) The "Echo", July 25, 1911, and May 7, 1912.

George Thomson often spoke openly and vehemently in favour of improvements. Without children himself, he nevertheless harangued the ratepayers over the glaring lack of educational facilities, which were not available until the fall of 1911. Voicing the complaints of the homesteaders, he stressed the need of traffic bridges across the Clearwater and Saskatchewan Rivers. The Clearwater bridge was built in 1914, but people along the Saskatchewan had to wait until 1946, when the David Thompson bridge was opened. His paper also clamoured for



road construction and reminded the community that a cemetery was required so that the dead would no longer have to be buried on the homesteads. (3)

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(3) The "Echo", October 1, 1912.

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The "Echo" received favourable comment in "The Orangeville Banner", a larger newspaper in Ontario: "We have just read a copy of a modest little newspaper called 'Rocky Mountain House Echo', further described as the official organ of the 'Canadian Uncle Sam Club'. The paper is printed on a single sheet, 14 by 11 inches, and is issued the first Saturday of every month. Whatever it lacks in size is made up for by the breeziness and spicy character of its news columns. The editor of the interesting publication is Mr. George Thomson of Prairie Grange, Alberta. George, our readers will be interested to learn, is a former Caledon boy; he was born and brought up in the Alton neighbourhood, and went West about fifteen years ago." (4)

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(4) Excerpt from "Orangeville Banner", Ontario, published in the "Echo", Feb. 18, 1911, p.2.

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The paper increased in size from a single monthly sheet printed by hand and costing 25 cents a year to a six-page, semi-monthly publication. The annual subscription rate was raised to fifty cents and the cost of advertising was twenty cents per column inch. Retiring in October, 1912, George Thomson took pride in the fact that he still had his first subscriber Robert Fleming, and his first advertiser John McVicar, who ran a general store in Red Deer.



The second paper, "The Guide", was edited by Mr. J. D. Skinner who, possessing twenty-two years of experience in this work, moved to Rocky Mountain House from Gadsby to take over the "Echo". Since his newspaper was issued weekly, he raised the subscription price to one dollar, and advertising now cost fifty cents per column inch with a special rate of twenty-five cents for any advertisements in excess of 250 inches used within a year. Skinner's publication, described by "The Lacombe Globe" as "a breezy little paper that voices the sentiments of the district" was actually large for a small village, containing local and outside news, a comic strip and a special page for women. "The Guide's" Liberal leanings, which local Conservatives found intensely annoying, were revealed by its approval of the Arthur Sifton Government. (5) Although somewhat less rough

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(5) "The Guide", April 1, 1913, p.1.

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in style, it was gossipy like the original newspaper, and was not always restrained in its comments. Articles like the following did not endear the editor to a certain section of the community: "A much needed clean-up in gambling circles took place this week. The pool hall here has developed into nothing more than a gambling dive ... It is a very significant fact that the gambling resorts of this town seem to centre around the premises of one firm. This place is no longer a camp town and better citizens are determined that camp town life and its vices shall cease. The pool hall will be permitted to run as a pool hall but the little dark room in the corner will have to be moved." (6)

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(6) "The Guide", January 1, 1915.

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In 1914 the strong opinions of "The Guide" caused a press feud which is unique in the history of Rocky Mountain House. It appears to have been touched off by Skinner's published statement that the village was not yet "a safe place for investment under conditions then existing", for "property was held at an abnormally high figure and nothing whatever was known as to the intentions of the railway companies." (7)

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(7) Ibid, August 28, 1914.

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Several business men had purchased a large number of lots from the Townsite Company, and in the opinion of the editor were holding the property for re-sale at unfair prices. A number of undignified remarks and acts by both parties widened the rift, each accusing the other of "knocking the village". Finally, the opponents of "The Guide" announced their intention of starting another newspaper, "The Mountaineer", under the editorship of George Thomson. The first issue appeared on March 31, 1914, and its introductory article ran: "For a year or more many people have expressed their opinion that a newspaper should be published in this village that would have impartial news columns, be free from irrational political opinions and personal animosity and, with such a paper, we are making our bow..." It succeeded in winning a portion of "The Guide's" advertising business and subscribers, but its circulation was not sufficient to dislodge the larger and more firmly established paper of J. D. Skinner. Somewhat subdued, the promoters of "The Mountaineer" stopped publication after seven months. In parting they uttered a few words of wisdom for the benefit of their rival: "Every paper should



offer criticism on public affairs, but should keep away from personalities, and we hope 'The Guide' will accept our kindly hint in this regard." The controversy was noteworthy in two respects. It proved that the population of the Rocky Mountain House area was not large enough to support two local papers, and above all it led to a noticeable refinement in editorial policy. Gradually the two factions disappeared entirely as former enemies cooperated in useful community activities.

"The Capital", edited by Mr. C. A. Roulston, followed "The Guide", which ceased publication in the spring of 1918. Less prone to abusive criticism than the previous newspapers, it served the district well for about two years. Early in 1921 Will Dyer and Chester Moffet, who had previous experience in press work, started "The Gazette", "an independent weekly newspaper published in the interests of Rocky Mountain House, Nordegg, Leslieville and surrounding districts". Offering a larger paper costing two dollars per year, they endeavoured to attract subscribers "within at least a radius of sixty miles." (8) Apparently the experiment was not as

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(8) "The Gazette", January 15, 1921.

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successful as they had hoped, for in October, 1922, both men left the village for positions on larger newspapers.

Although the proprietorship of the local paper changed frequently, another party was always ready to undertake the work. Norman Frost was one of the most successful editors at Rocky Mountain House. He took over "The Gazette", which was in a shocking state, having few adver-



tisers and only eighty subscribers, and in one month increased its circulation six-fold. In 1923 the name of the paper was changed to "The Mountaineer", a more appropriate title. Assisted by his father G. W. Frost, he did much to make the community aware of its responsibility in supporting the press. "Many people," he wrote, "sneer at their local newspaper, scoffing at the efforts of the editor who works under great handicaps. It is unfair to compare it in quality with the large dailies of the metropolis, for it serves a distinctly different purpose." (9) He indicated that for

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(9) "The Mountaineer", May 11, 1926.

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the small sum of \$1.50 per year a subscriber received fifty-two issues containing news, the advertisements of village merchants, municipal, legal and sale notices. For the farmers it also listed hog shipping days, train schedules and market reports and provided informative articles on agriculture. Norman Frost remained in charge of "The Mountaineer" for five years, selling out to Mr. G. H. Pearson in 1927. He again edited it for a short period in 1932, when under Mr. E. Beveridge the newspaper was in financial straits.

Mr. W. H. Schierholtz became the proprietor in the spring of 1933 and remained editor until shortly before the time of his death in 1947. He gave the newspaper a stability which it had lacked in the past owing to the constant change in management. "The Mountaineer" is now co-edited by Mrs. Grace Schierholtz his widow, and Jack Gare, a veteran of the last war, who acquired a knowledge of newspaper work at Trochu under his father. The useful





page entitled "Farm Notes" is edited by District Agriculturist E. A. Chisholm. The only paper "serving the west country", "The Mountaineer" enjoys a wide circulation and has become a profitable enterprise.

The growth of the church at Rocky Mountain House kept pace with the development of the press. The work which the itinerant missionaries could accomplish was limited, and their opinions were sometimes scoffed at by a small sceptical element in the young community, yet their services were welcomed and supported by the majority of the settlers. As the urban centre became more than a squatters' settlement, strong Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic and Nazarene congregations were formed, which had a refining influence on the expanding society. More recently the Dutch Reformed Church has been established at Rocky Mountain House. Besides providing an opportunity for religious worship and promoting works of charity, the churches assisted other organizations of the village in directing the activities of the young people into wholesome channels. The Presbyterian and Anglican Churches each made a further contribution of a different nature.

In 1929 the Women's Auxiliary of the Anglican Church sponsored a Dramatic Society which for six years enabled interested members to display their histrionic talents. At the same time it provided a new type of entertainment for the people of this area. The plays, chiefly comedy, were well chosen, and were apparently presented with some skill



for they attracted full audiences. In 1930 Holy Trinity Church was built at a cost of \$3500.00, and money raised by the Dramatic Society enabled the Anglican congregation to clear the debt within five years.

The special contribution of the Presbyterian Church was in the field of health services. Although Rocky Mountain House was seldom without a doctor, for several years the sick had to be housed in private homes as there was no hospital available. The doctors were obliged to travel many miles to administer to rural patients who were unable to reach the village. During the First World War Mrs. Charlie Stewart, a registered nurse, opened a nursing home which accommodated about eight patients. She tended victims of the influenza epidemic in 1918. For many years, in the most inclement weather, she would ride great distances to treat people who were ill. To this day she is remembered with respect and affection by the inhabitants of Rocky Mountain House. Nurse Stewart's home was the only hospital in the village until the present building was constructed in 1938.

In 1936 Rev. R. K. Peck, the minister of the local Presbyterian Church, noticed in one of the periodicals of the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Society of Canada that a hospital operated by them in Northern Ontario had been sold to the community, and the proceeds were available to aid hospital building in the West. He lost no time in requesting this assistance for Rocky Mountain House. A subsequent visit by two officers of the Missionary Board of





Mrs. Stewart's nursing home. It is now a private residence.



The present hospital at Rocky Mountain House. It was undergoing further construction when this picture was taken.





the Presbyterian Church resulted in a promise of a ten-bed hospital, providing that the community could raise \$4,000.00 of the \$15,000.00 needed for its construction. A local committee was formed to look after the project and the required amount was raised through donations. In July 1938, a substantial hospital was officially opened by Deputy Minister of Health Dr. M. R. Bow. During 1939 and 1940 the building was enlarged and improved x-ray, operating and sterilizing facilities were installed.

It was felt in 1946 that Rocky Mountain House should conduct its own health scheme, and so release the Missionary Society's investment for hospital development in other areas. Under the leadership of Dr. A. C. Greenaway and several other interested citizens, a provisional board was formed which drew up a health plan that was acceptable to the ratepayers. The hospital was purchased through the issue of debentures which were sold locally and the Rocky Mountain House Municipal Hospital District was established. The alertness of Rev. Peck and the willingness of the Presbyterian Missionary Society to provide financial and administrative assistance, had thus introduced an essential service to Rocky Mountain House area.

Educational facilities were not provided until several years after the first congregation had been formed. In January, 1911, there was still no school in the settlement, and yet the ratepayers at a poorly attended meeting voted against the organization of a school district. At this time



the population of the area concerned (five-sixths of township 39, range 7, west of the fifth meridian) was seventy-one; the ratepayers numbered thirty-three and there were thirty-one children, twenty-one of whom were over or had just reached school age. (10) Some argued speciously that

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(10) The "Echo", Nov.7, 1911.

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a district should not be formed until it was known definitely where the railways would run, while others thought no action should be taken until the government road past Rocky Mountain House was completed. The "Echo" suggested that the real objection was probably the school tax which the people without children were unwilling to pay.

On behalf of the small group that was concerned about the education of the children, Leslie Slaght, an early pioneer who passed away at Rocky Mountain House in 1951, wrote to the Department of Education for advice. He received the following reply:

February 27, 1911.

Sir:

I have your letter of the 17th inst. and in reply I would say that although the minister has the authority under section 39 of the School Ordinance to order the formation of a school district even against the expressed wishes of a majority of the resident ratepayers, the conditions existing in your district do not quite meet the requirements of the School Ordinance in this connection. It is desirable in any event to erect the district with the sanction of the resident ratepayers and I would suggest that the committee call another first meeting when the outlook appears more promising. The necessary forms for this purpose will be mailed to you upon application.

Your obedient servant,  
D.S.MacKenzie  
Deputy Minister of Education



During the summer Mr. A. W. Brockman again took up the matter, assisted by Messrs. T. B. Williams and J. Haworth. A third meeting was called in October and the fifteen rate-payers present agreed that a school should be established. The new district was called the Confluence School District because the Clearwater joined the North Saskatchewan at approximately the centre of the township. A board of trustees was immediately appointed to make arrangements for the erection of a building, the purchasing of supplies and equipment and the engaging of a teacher. The original members of the board were Alfred Brockman, George Fletcher, and Fred Williams. The "Echo" received a letter at this time from a resident who inquired: "Are the newly appointed trustees men of culture and do they think themselves thoroughly fitted to carry out the trusteeship? If not, they should resign at once!" (11) Probably this same individual had not bothered

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(11) Ibid, Dec. 5, 1911.

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to attend any of the meetings. At least his remarks were typical of the disgruntled minority found in almost every school district; these people envied the authority and social prestige of the local trustees but were not always willing to assume the obligations or face the criticism which such a position entailed.

On February 27, 1912, a sum of one thousand dollars was borrowed on the security of the Confluence School District, and Leslie Slaght received the contract to build a one-room school on the south-east corner of section 27, township 39, range 7, west of the fifth meridian. Miss Mabel Fleming was





the first teacher and school opened in October with an attendance of forty pupils, the majority of whom were in grade one although their ages varied greatly. Miss Fleming was young and of small stature but an effective disciplinarian. She conducted the school successfully during the first three years.

The administration of the school was a perennial worry. Taxes were not always promptly paid, and the school board frequently had insufficient funds to pay the teacher's salary, small as it was. A representative of the Department of Education visited Rocky Mountain House in 1916 to investigate the serious problems of the school district. The class register at this time contained seventy names, and the average attendance was approximately fifty. Since one teacher could not carry such a load adequately, it was recommended that another room be added in the immediate future. The original school was never enlarged but others were formed within the Rocky Mountain House area, and the erection of a village school in 1922 gradually relieved the situation. In 1938 the burden of local school boards was greatly reduced by the formation of Rocky Mountain House School Division, No.15, which includes Local Improvement District 65 (thirty-two townships containing most of the Rocky Mountain House trading area) and the Raven Municipality, and extends south into the Waterloo Municipality and east into the Red Deer Municipality. The division has sixty-seven rooms in addition to fifteen rooms at Rocky Mountain House. Some centralization has taken place, but further expansion will





Two views of the old Confluence  
School House.



Remodelled, the old school is now  
a private residence.





The first village school. It was built in 1922.





be necessary in the near future. Larger schools at Rocky Mountain House, Caroline, Dickson, Markerville and Benalto accommodate rural children who are transported to and from these centres by bus. As elsewhere in Alberta, the trend is away from the traditional one-room school which, though valuable as a focal point for community interest and social activities, cannot meet the demands of modern education. (12)

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(12) Interview with Mr. Jack Stronach, secretary of the Rocky Mountain House School Division, No.15, July, 1951.

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The early forms of entertainment at Rocky Mountain House were of a typically pioneer character. The excitement of community gatherings intrigued settlers, most of whom were living on scattered homesteads. The Pioneers' Basket Picnic in July, the Pioneers' Banquet in late fall or December and the annual Christmas Tree, were the outstanding social events of the year. Probably to keep the group a manageable size, only settlers living in six neighbouring townships were considered to be within the Rocky Mountain House area (13) and so eligible to attend. A program com-

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(13) The area consisted of townships 38, 39 and 40 in ranges 7 and 8, west of the fifth meridian. The "Echo" Dec.5,1911.

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mittee was appointed well in advance of each celebration, and the "Echo" kept the public informed regarding the preparations. "The committee," it reported, "is agreeably surprised at the number who are so willing to help to make up the programme and give the toasts. A large programme is already started which will be enlarged, singers will have a good organ and accompanist to assist them; as there is a



very large programme of songs, recitations, musical selections, toasts, step dances and pioneer stories, the committee wish to state there will be no dance in connection with the banquet. An excellent dinner is being provided by Chalmers & Lunday; the hall which is 22 x 60 feet will be decorated with tools used by the pioneers, flags and bunting. A smoking room will be provided for smokers and a dressing room for the ladies." (14) In 1912 the banquet was held in the Mission

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(14) Ibid.

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Hall. A large heated tent had to be erected nearby to shelter the overflow of guests. The picnics were frequently held at the old chimneys, a pleasant spot overlooking a bend in the river. Baskets of food brought by the ladies were combined to make a hearty meal, which was followed by numerous races for the children.

George Thomson, who played the part of Santa Claus, describes the hilarious Christmas celebration of 1910; "Perhaps the greatest event of the year was the gathering at the Bertrand home just before Christmas. There was community singing, recitations by the children; there was a brightly decorated tree. Everything was carried off according to arrangements made by Mrs. J. H. Bertrand and Mrs. Dan Hayes. ~~Mr.~~ MacDonald, the missionary, was chairman, and kept the children informed just where Santa Claus was, from notes he was getting at the store. There was a very excited group of children to greet old Santa Claus when he landed on the roof with his sleigh and prancing reindeer with all their bells jingling. They could hear him scolding Mr. Bertrand for



having a chimney he could not get down; then he slid off the roof into a big snowdrift and came rushing into the front door, his fur robes and long white beard all covered with snow. A little girl told me the next day: 'You sure missed it not being there to see Santa playing with the children, hugging the mothers, slapping the dads and trying to kiss the girls.' (15) Later the Oddfellows spon-

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(15) "The Mountaineer", Jan.16, 1946, p1.

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sored the Christmas Tree and Concert for many years in their hall. Treats were donated by local merchants, and the teacher looked after the program of recitations and songs. Young and old came by sleigh from miles around to participate in the yuletide festivities.

The first two pioneer events gradually disappeared as the community grew and the July Sports Day and the Fall Fair, sponsored by the Agricultural Society, took their place. Interest in these events was stimulated by the enthusiastic announcements of the local paper: "The town has had a meeting and July 1 was set as the 'July Sports Day'. Over \$300 have already been collected for prizes and it is reported that the first special train will be run over the C.N. track from Sylvan Lake. The big feature of the sports will be base-ball, \$75 in cash prize for the team west of the C. & E. Ry. [Calgary and Edmonton Railway] which wins. There will be broncho busting, bucking contests, roping the steer, climbing the greasy pole, catching the greasy pig (and perhaps a blind one), horse races, foot races,





jumping contests, chewing tobacco contests, smoking contests, shooting, Indian races and other events. In fact, it will be a regular frontier sports day in the last great West ... A tug of war between the 'bootleggers' and 'cider dope shiners' will wind up the day's performances amidst a brilliant display of fireworks and an Indian pow-wow." (16)

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(16) Ibid, June 4, 1912.

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The Diamond Jubilee of Confederation held on July 1, 1927, was one of the more elaborate celebrations. The special attraction was the parade containing patriotic floats which various groups in the village had prepared for this great occasion. Led by the Boys' Band the procession passed slowly through the main streets, halting before a temporary platform near the school. After "O Canada" had been sung by the assembly, the mayor spoke briefly on Canadian political growth since Britain's acquisition of Canada. His address was followed by the usual program of competitive sports.

The Fall Fair, although devoted primarily to agricultural exhibits, was also a form of public entertainment. The masquerade parade, which was part of the program, created a Mardi gras mood in the village, and most farmers could not resist taking a holiday from their autumn labours.

There were, of course, other kinds of amusement. The pool hall was frequented throughout the year, occasionally wrestling and boxing matches were sponsored and usually a weekly dance. Before there was a hall, dances were held at Thomas Gray's farm because he had a large house, and



music was provided by James Wilde and his fiddlers. The Passtime Movie later attracted full audiences with its special family rates. Whist parties were held from time to time as well as "bachelor parties" where the men engaged in cribbage tournaments. For those who preferred more thought provoking entertainment, a debating society was formed, which held numerous meetings. Its topics were well chosen, and the debates for some years held the interest of the general public.

Some effort was made to provide suitable recreation for the youth of the district. The churches sponsored Trail Rangers, Canadian Girls in Training and other programs. In the spring of 1930 the Boy Scouts were organized and Cameron Kirby, son of the postmaster, devoted much time to their training. Mr. Plathan's band attracted boys possessing musical talent. Alfred Hooke, principal of the Confluence School from 1930 to 1935, and now Minister of Economic Affairs for Alberta, started a literary club. It was open to school children above grade six and young people who had left school. The village has always been without a gymnasium, but there are ample opportunities for outdoor sports.

For many years the nearest beach was at Sylvan Lake, which after 1912 could be reached by train. In 1927 residents of Rocky Mountain House awoke to the fact that they had a small but beautiful lake a few miles north-west of their village. In a letter to "The Mountaineer " William Ellenburgh, one of the "trail blazers" who had cut the



THE BEACH AT CRIMSON LAKE







original path to its sandy beach, suggested that Crimson Lake be made a summer resort. Not long afterwards the townspeople began to make this place more accessible. In April, 1931, an enthusiastic group of men led by Edward Brett widened the road that winds through the numerous sand hills lying between the lake and the town. They improved the beach, erected a pier and prepared a parking space for cars. The profusion of berries and wild flowers and a wooded island enhance the lake's attractiveness. The origin of the name Crimson is not certain, but it was probably suggested by the abundance of fireweed which grows in the surrounding woods or perhaps the brilliant reflection of the sun in the water. Now a Provincial Park, Crimson Lake is rapidly becoming a popular resort where picnicking, boating and swimming may be enjoyed. Many cabins have already been built along its wooded shores, and yet it has retained a tranquil atmosphere. This lake provides a pleasant gathering place for the people of the Rocky Mountain House area.

In the summer of 1951 the Pioneer Ranch Camp for boys and girls was opened by Mr. Carl Joseph Curry on behalf of the Inter-School Christian Fellowship. Situated on the eastern shore of Crimson Lake, it offers at cost an excellent training in a variety of outdoor activities during July and August, which include trail riding, canoeing, boating, riflery, archery, hiking and chuck wagon trips. There is a similar camp in Manitoba and three in Ontario, where the idea originated, but only the Alberta branch



THE PIONEER RANCH AT CRIMSON LAKE



Mr. Curry is standing on the steps  
leading down to the water.



maintains a herd of horses. The ranch was suggested by Mr. Curry who, though a native of Ontario, readily perceived the special recreational interests of boys and girls living in the West. The success of the Pioneer Ranch is apparent. At present forty-five children can be accommodated every two weeks, but it is anticipated that further expansion will be necessary in the future. (17)

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(17) Interview with Carl J. Curry, Pioneer Ranch, Crimson Lake, July 13, 1952.

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For those who are chiefly interested in fishing, trout are available in the numerous small streams that flow into the North Saskatchewan. This summer a fine new fishing ground at Twin Lakes was opened to the public. Previously inaccessible owing to muskegs, these small lakes lying just half a mile off the Crimson Lake road are described as "a real boon to the business men who have only a short time in the evening to go out to try their luck". (18) About

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(18) "The Mountaineer", July 3, 1952.

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nine miles south of Rocky Mountain House lies swampy Cow Lake, which is fed by springs. Less attractive than Crimson Lake, it is nevertheless sometimes visited by hunters and fishermen. It overflows at its south-east corner into Cow Creek which, at one time stocked with Eastern Brook Trout, is recognized as a good fishing stream.

In season berry picking and hunting have always offered the inhabitants of the region a pleasant escape from the work-a-day world. These diversions also attract tourists. During one of the more fruitful seasons "The





Mountaineer" reported: "Berry pickers from all over the province are gathering a bountiful harvest in the sand hills and other spots across the river. People come in trailers and camp for several days, taking out many pounds of blueberries and raspberries. (19)

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(19) Ibid, August 31, 1938.

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A plentiful supply of small game is found in the district, and big game inhabits the eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Guides have usually been available for hunters who could afford them. In the fall of 1930 Tex Small and D. W. Robison opened a guide camp some twelve miles north of Horburg on the Little Baptiste River. They were fully equipped for hunting moose, deer and bear as well as for trips into the rugged sheep and goat country. Ray Mustard, now a forest ranger, on several occasions also guided wealthy Americans who were in search of trophies. Mr. S. C. Kerr, an Ohio lawyer, succeeded in obtaining several fine sheep heads, one of which he donated to the Carnegie Museum at Philadelphia and another to the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburg. (20) Clarence Sands, a pioneer of

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(20) Ibid, Nov. 8, 1933 and Nov. 7, 1934.

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the Rocky Mountain House area, and his sons now operate the largest guiding outfit west of Red Deer.

The good old days of community picnics and suppers, which "oldtimers" recall with apparent nostalgia, disappeared as the swelling population began to break into smaller associations. This development started during the First



World War, but the growth of lodges and societies proceeded more rapidly after the armistice. In 1915 Grand Master G. W. Henderson of Calgary instituted Oddfellows Lodge No.120 at Rocky Mountain House. About the same time the Women's Institute was organized, and its main purpose was to raise funds for local improvements. In 1916 the Ladies Home Charity Association was formed. A branch of the Great War Veterans Association, later called the Canadian Legion, was organized at Rocky Mountain House shortly after 1918. It helped to promote the annual Armistice program and Poppy Day campaign, and endeavoured to look after the interests of local veterans. The Loyal Orange Lodge, Mountain View, No.2852, was founded by 1922. Two years later the I.O.O.F. Rebekah Lodge was instituted, as well as the Knights of Pythias Lodge, called North Star No.24. In 1927 an unusual society called Native Sons of Canada formed a branch at Rocky Mountain House. This organization began in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1921 and secured a charter from the Dominion Government the following year. A nationalistic society which appealed to zealous Canadians, its professed aims were: "To keep in Canada all her native born; to bring back to Canada all those Canadians who reside in foreign lands; to induce desirable people to make homes in Canada; to create and foster a distinctly Canadian national spirit; to provide a non-partisan, non-sectarian influence in the affairs of Canada; to promote a spirit of national unity and harmony and to foster a distinctive sense of pride in the privilege of Canadian citizenship; to further the de-



velopment of Canadian literature, art, science, and Canadian institutions; to generally promote the interests of Canada and Canadians." (21) In an effort to inspire greater patri-

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(21) Ibid, January 5, 1927.

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otism the local branch recommended that the Union Jack be flown over the school grounds during the day. The members also took a keen interest in the preservation of the fort chimneys. Probably because of its chauvinistic colouring, the Native Sons received limited support at Rocky Mountain House, and after several years of activity faded away.

Lochearn Lodge, No.151, of the Masonic Order was established in 1927; the Order of the Elks appeared in 1930, and it would appear that the Ladies Orange Benevolent Association and the Macdonald of Garth Chapter of the I.O.D.E. began to function about the same time. The Kinsmen Club, organized in 1942, started a "Milk for Britain Fund" and made many valuable contributions to the community, especially in respect to recreation for the young people. All of these lodges and societies, and several new ones are active today with the exception of the Elks, the Knights of Pythias and the Ladies' Home Charity Association. There is a branch of the Fish and Game Association in the town as well as the Independent Order of Foresters. The former has endeavoured to arouse interest in the conservation of useful wild life and the destruction of predatory birds and animals. Besides their formal social activities most of these organizations give donations to various benevolent associations and institutions throughout the province.





Although Rocky Mountain House still has the atmosphere of a frontier town, the society has passed beyond the pioneer stage. The numerous associations which have been mentioned, an adequate press, school and hospital, five churches with subsidiary organizations, together with the natural recreational facilities of the region, give the people of the town and surrounding country ample opportunity to lead a full and enjoyable life.

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## CHAPTER TEN

### ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE IN LATER YEARS

Rocky Mountain House was proclaimed a village on May 2, 1913, and its future expansion seemed to be assured. Many of the settlers believed that they would live to see a small city on the banks of the upper Saskatchewan. Such hopes, however, have not been fulfilled. The early years of bustling activity and varied opportunities for employment had been stimulated greatly by the railroad builders. When they left progress slackened perceptibly, as the settlement entered a long dormant period characterized by economic depression, a spirit of disillusionment and a series of disasters.

The village, consisting chiefly of wooden structures, had frequent fires. Faulty chimneys and hot stoves, especially during the winter, caused most of them, and the flames were difficult to control as there was not an adequate water supply. During December, 1922, and January, 1923, ten buildings were burned, including three cafes, a shoe-repair shop, a livery barn, Seth Sitton's store, a hotel, the McDermott Hardware, a butcher shop and a law office. (1) After this serious loss of property,

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(1) "The Gazette", Jan. 3, 10, 31, 1923.

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the village council urged the residents to check their chimneys and stoves carefully, recommended that building be fire-proofed and made some effort to improve the efficiency of the fire-fighting equipment. Mr. P. McDermott quickly had a new brick store erected, but the predominance of wooden buildings continued to make the fire hazard great.



Assisted by a firm of consulting engineers, Haddin and Mills Ltd. of Calgary, the council in 1931 placed before the ratepayers two alternative plans, either of which would have provided the village with an effective defence against fire. Both schemes were voted down for the times were hard, and the citizens preferred to face the danger of fire rather than carry the burden of extra taxes. Two years later, after the Modern Cafe and the general store of S. Saad were demolished, the village council formed a permanent fire brigade instead of relying entirely on untrained volunteers.

The greatest catastrophe experienced by the people of Rocky Mountain House occurred dramatically. On the afternoon of July 9, 1927, a tornado twisted through the centre of the village, damaging or totally destroying some fifty buildings. Boards, and even roofs were flung from the west to the east side of the main street, windows were smashed and the torrential rains that followed the two-minute onslaught ruined much of the stock in the shattered stores. The Atlas lumber piles were transformed into a tangled mass. "By some miracle," "The Mountaineer" recalls, "there were no deaths, only two men badly hurt and they recovered. George Meston was in the McDermott Hardware when it fell apart and he plunged into the cellar when the floor collapsed. Jack Fuller was also in the store, and when the front window crashed, he started for the back door, but the roof lifted and he rushed back to the front, only to be knocked down by a rafter. He crawled to the door just as the wall fell out onto the sidewalk." (2) The debris

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(2) "The Mountaineer", July 12, 1951.





was cleared away rapidly but, since only the Atlas Lumber Company was insured against such a calamity, the loss of property was a heavy blow to the village.

The most severe set-back to the community as a whole was the economic slump which between the two World Wars affected all of Canada. During these years the prices offered for agricultural and timber products were low, and farmers had little incentive or money to clear new land for cultivation. Many were finding it difficult to pay their taxes and meet the ordinary expenses of living.

The poverty of the rural population burdened two municipalities in the area, Prairie Creek and Lochearn. At a ratepayers' meeting in 1937, it was shown that less than one-third of the lands in the rural portion of the Lochearn Municipality had the school taxes paid in full, making it extremely difficult to finance new schools that were urgently needed. In a resolution made on this occasion the Provincial Government was requested not to encourage settlers to move into the district unless they were able to earn a living and pay their taxes. (3) Only by reducing the salaries of municipal officials and school teachers, and curtailing road improvements, were these districts able to struggle on until 1939. In that year, owing to tax arrears, the sharply mounting costs of relief and medical care to indigent families, and other financial problems, the two councils resigned. The Department of Municipal Affairs appointed Mr. S. Potts, a municipal inspector, administrator of the Lochearn and Prairie

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(3) "The Mountaineer", March 3, 1937.

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Creek Municipalities. Both districts became part of Local Improvement District No.65 in 1944. This step was a necessary but unfortunate retrogression in the development of local government.

Although Rocky Mountain House was not part of a municipality, the villagers depended largely on the surrounding region for their livelihood. The merchants were extremely jealous of outside competition and did all in their power to induce the people of the district to trade at local stores. In April, 1925, they launched, according to "The Mountaineer" , "a huge counter-attack against the Mail Order Houses".(4) They

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(4) "The Mountaineer", April 22, 1925.

declared that by selling for cash only their prices could be lowered and "mail" order competition" reduced. This policy was not popular with those farmers who needed credit while waiting for crop returns or livestock to fatten. The merchants also vied with one another in holding bargain sales. In one issue of "The Mountaineer", J. A. Driscoll advertised, among other "specials", "14 bars of Pearl Soap and five packets of Lux Flakes for one dollar", and for the same price the Killico Store had sixteen different "deals", including "4 lbs. of Pure Lard, 3 lbs. of Raisins and 3 lbs. of Icing Sugar", "49 lbs. of Buffalo Flour, 2 pkgs. of Yeast Cakes", and "5 loaves of Bread, 5 - lb. packet of Prunes, 7 - lb. bag of Salt". (5) Later in the same year "a community buying cam-

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(5) "The Mountaineer", June 15, 1932

paign" from October 1, 1932, to March 31, 1933, was sponsored by the merchants and "The Mountaineer". Approximately \$350.00



in prizes were offered, \$100.00 to the person in the district making the greatest amount of "home" purchases during the specified period, \$50.00 to the second highest and a number of smaller prizes to those people who estimated the nearest number of entries that would be received. Since "The Mountaineer" contributed part of the prize money, all competitors had to be paid up subscribers. Such enticements were used to stimulate trade during the period when money was scarce.

It was not always easy for some farmers to reach their trading centre at Rocky Mountain House owing to poor roads and the difficult crossing of the Saskatchewan River. The loudest complaint was in connection with the ferry, which was subject to dangerous mishaps and irregular service until Mr. O. E. Thompson took charge of it in 1924. However, even in the hands of a competent operator, the ferry was not entirely satisfactory. The local Board of Trade made many efforts to secure a traffic bridge and road improvements. It was argued that the people on the north side of the river had no means of reaching the village during at least four months of the year, when the ferry could not be used because of "low water, slush ice or high water". (6) Many farmers,

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(6) "The Mountaineer", Feb. 10, 1926.

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it was stated, had to curtail grain and stock raising owing to the inaccessibility of markets. A number of daring teamsters drove loaded wagons across the railroad bridge, but they did so at the risk of both injury and prosecution for trespassing. At this time there was a dirt highway between Red Deer and Rocky Mountain House. It was suitable for traf-





fic only in dry weather, and ended at the east bank of the river. The road west to Nordegg was not yet under construction.

After 1931 there were definite indications of progress in the area. In August of that year Mayor W. J. Kirby received a letter from Alfred Speakman, Member of Parliament for the Red Deer constituency, which bore the heartening news that a road from Rocky Mountain House to Nordegg would be started during the winter under the joint provincial and federal scheme for unemployment relief. This road was completed several years later, and relief camps also constructed a road fourteen miles west of Nordegg, through mountainous terrain to Windy Point. In 1932 Gordon L. Sorenson started a regular bus service between Red Deer and Rocky Mountain House and the highway was gradually improved.

In the town a new hospital was in process of erection during 1937, as well as a skating rink, a curling rink, two business blocks, a fire hall and about twelve residences. In the same year the Calgary Power Company extended its transmission lines to the village. Feeling that at last they were emerging from the wilderness, the inhabitants staged a great celebration in October, 1937, to mark the Silver Anniversary of Rocky Mountain House. The electric lights were turned on for the first time, and everyone enjoyed two days of revelry. There was "a Calithumpian parade, Barbecue sandwiches, the big midway down Main Street, the Buffalo Supper at the Legion Hall, the Old-Timers' registration and big dances on both Friday and Saturday." (7)

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(7) "The Mountaineer", Oct. 20, 1937.

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On August 16, 1939, Rocky Mountain House was officially declared a town by the Hon. Lucien Maynard, Minister of Municipal Affairs. According to a civic census taken at that time, the urban population was 769, exclusive of "Old Town", the hospital staff and a number of families living immediately outside the town limits. The first mayor was William Teskey, councillors were W. H. Schierholtz and J. A. McLean. Mrs. S. A. Durnford was the secretary-treasurer. Under the new status certain changes had to be made in administration and Mr. J. Minkler, for some years secretary-treasurer of Lacombe, accompanied by Mayor Thomas Wilkes and Chief of Police Mosier, visited Rocky Mountain House to help in this matter. Although a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was already stationed at Rocky Mountain House as well as a police magistrate, a police department, consisting of one chief and a constable, was established. Besides enforcing the law in the town itself, they collected license fees, business taxes and acted as foremen of public works. Rocky Mountain House gained further recognition in 1943, when it became the centre of a provincial constituency, represented by the popular Alfred Hooke, Minister of Economic Affairs.

To the great satisfaction of the entire community, after thirty-seven years of ferry service, a bridge was officially opened at the new town by the Hon. W. A. Fallow, Minister of Public Works, in February, 1946. Some five thousand people gathered to witness the ceremony. The bridge is a great convenience to farmers, lumbermen and tourists, providing easier access to the newly gravelled David Thompson





The David Thompson Bridge was officially opened in February, 1946.



The former ferry service  
at Rocky Mountain House.





Highway which runs west to Nordegg. It is now hoped that the Government will build this road through the mountains to the Banff-Jasper Highway. The route was actually surveyed during 1939, and in the following year Ernest Ross, accompanied by several other men from Rocky Mountain House, negotiated the distance between Nordegg and the Banff-Jasper Highway in a 1930 Ford car and a 1940 International truck. Later, other parties made the difficult trip to prove that such a road would be practicable.

Since the last war a number of veterans have settled on land in the Rocky Mountain House area under the Department of Veterans' Affairs. The rural population has also been increased by a promising Dutch settlement of approximately four hundred people. During 1946 and 1947 members of the Dutch Immigration Committee, together with representatives of the Department of Colonization and Agriculture of the Canadian National Railways, investigated settlement opportunities in several districts in Northern and Central Alberta. The district around Rocky Mountain House was selected as being suitable for Dutch farming families.

Although these immigrants tend to form a little society apart from the community in general, their contributions to the area are considerable. They are industrious, moral and deeply religious. Belonging to the Dutch Reformed Church, they first held regular services in the hall belonging to the Women's Institute while a new Church was being built. The majority of these settlers are experienced farmers



and know the value of crop rotation, legumes and the use of fertilizers. It is expected that they will rapidly improve their land. The Dutch immigrants have helped the expansion of agriculture, which is essential to the economic growth of the community in view of the anticipated decline in the lumber industry.

Long associated with the district are the Cree and the Chippewa Indians who live on reservations north-west of the town. They impart to Rocky Mountain House a primitive quaintness, but have always been somewhat of a problem. For more than thirty years Mr. Henry Stelfox looked after their welfare voluntarily on behalf of the Department of Indian Affairs. Grant MacLeod is now the resident Indian Agent.

Most of the Cree came from North Battleford, Saskatchewan, in 1930 and a smaller number from Pigeon Lake joined them in the Rocky Mountain House area. They wished to settle on a reserve while suitable Crown land was still available, but negotiations between this Cree band and the Department of Indian Affairs were delayed owing to the immoderate demands of their chief, Louis Sunchild. After his death in 1944, the Cree, about one hundred in all, accepted 12,800 acres lying in the vicinity of the Baptiste River.

The Chippewa Indians proved even more obstinate. For fifty years led by Jim O'Chiese, their implacable chief, they wandered over the western and north-western regions of Alberta, hunting and trapping, working in logging camps and saw mills or clearing brush and making fence for farmers. Too proud to accept from the white man land which they con-



sidered was already theirs, these Indians refused to sign a treaty until poverty and disease convinced the majority that such a step was their only salvation. In 1950 the Chippewa, numbering over two hundred, were given a large reservation of 33,000 acres lying between the Nordegg and Baptiste Rivers.

Several of the Cree and Chippewa families are successful farmers and during the winter many of them receive good wages from the Atlas logging outfits and saw mills which are working the valuable timber berths located on both reservations. The Indians in general are not, however, consistent workers, and being extremely improvident, spend their money as quickly as they earn it. Much of their inertia is attributed to poor eating habits and diet, tuberculosis and syphilis, as well as frequent intermarriage. Since it is no longer feasible for them to follow their ancient nomadic way of life, the Department of Indian Affairs is encouraging them to build houses and engage in agricultural pursuits instead of spending so much time in the town of Rocky Mountain House or travelling many miles to attend "Sun Dances". (8)

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(8) Interview with Mr. Henry Stelfox, Rocky Mountain House, July, 1951, and July, 1952.

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As a town, Rocky Mountain House has made rapid strides. By 1941 the population had reached 800 and the 1946 census showed an increase of 206. "The Mountaineer" complained that the figure 1006 did not do justice to the actual number of inhabitants. "In addition," it stated,





"there are the homes located on the Day acreage, those on the east side of the river bank on the bridge road, the Slaght subdivision down at 'Old Town', about eight homes in and around the Griffin Auto Camp, the subdivision on the former Andy Kline farm and the new Hart subdivision adjoining the town on the east. The hospital alone has a resident staff of around twelve. One can go so far as to include a half-dozen homes on the west bank of the river. All these occupants are in every respect part of the town, except that they are living just outside of the corporate limits. They would add approximately 300 to the actual population of the town." (9) The 1951 Dominion Census set the population of

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(9) "The Mountaineer", October 2, 1946.

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Rocky Mountain House proper at 1147, but the townspeople claim 1400. The area has also increased through the years. The townsite, originally 127 acres, is now over 260.

The facilities of the town have expanded greatly, and the new business establishments and residences offer a striking contrast to the rough structures remaining from earlier days. The fire hazard has been reduced considerably. A modern fire truck and equipment were purchased in 1950, and there is a trained fire brigade to deal with emergencies. In addition, the Forest Rangers located in the town are well equipped to handle large conflagrations. Water is obtained from local wells and the North Saskatchewan River, and private water systems have been installed in a number of homes. Cement sidewalks are gradually replacing the board walks and dirt streets are being gravelled. The natural surroundings are



most attractive. If more of the citizens made an effort to beautify their homes and yards, Rocky Mountain House would be one of the most pleasant places in Alberta.

Possessing all the facilities essential to a farming and lumbering community, the town serves a large area. Local Improvement District 65, containing 660,480 acres, and the Raven Municipality, containing 190,080 acres, form the greater part of the Rocky Mountain House region. (10) Ac-

(10) "Annual Report of the Department of Municipal Affairs of the Province of Alberta", 1950, pp.124, and 150.

cording to the 1951 Dominion Census, the former district has a present population of 4,092, and the latter 3,515. Although Rocky Mountain House is not likely to achieve the development predicted for it by the "Echo" in 1910, it has become the most important urban centre west of Red Deer, and will play an important part in the further settlement and agricultural expansion of an extensive territory in the grey wooded belt.

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July, 1952.

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## APPENDICES



APPENDIX A

List of Men in Charge of  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE  
After the Union of 1821

1821-22	John Rowand	Chief Trader
1822-23	Joseph Felix La Rocque	Chief Trader
1823 (summer)	Patrick Small	Clerk
1824-25	Patrick Small	Clerk
1828-32	Henry Fisher	Clerk
1834-46	John E. Harriott	Chief Trader
1846-47	G. McDougall	Clerk
1848-49	Louis Leblanc	Postmaster
1849-53	John E. Harriott	Chief Factor
1853-54	Louis Leblanc	Postmaster
1854-55	H. J. Moberly	
1855-61	Joseph H. Brazeau	Clerk & Postmaster
1864-67	Richard Hardisty	Chief Trader
1867 (summer)	Joseph H. Brazeau	Clerk
1867-70	James Hackland	Chief Trader
1870 (summer)	An Interpreter & six men	
1870-71	James Hackland	Chief Trader
1874-75	Angus Fraser	Interpreter

During the season of 1841-42 it would appear that Harriott was at Edmonton while Rowand went to the Columbia with Governor Simpson. (See Simpson to Harriott, Nov.4, 1841, H.B.C.Archives D.4/59, pp 30-32).





## APPENDIX B

Excerpts from the correspondence between Chief Commissioner James A. Grahame at Fort Garry and Chief Factor Richard Hardisty at Fort Edmonton relevant to the final abandonment of Rocky Mountain House:

1) Chief Commissioner Grahame to Chief Factor Hardisty, December 28, 1874:

"... the Post at the Rocky Mountain House has been a grievous expense to us, and as you acknowledge, its Returns are of no importance. If no improvement is exhibited this winter you will at once close it up endeavouring to find some one you can depend upon to take charge of it. The useless expenditure of money keeping up unprofitable Stations because they cost money, while the prospect of future advantage from this is hopeless, is false policy and very detrimental to the result of the business, which should in every branch be paying.

"The question of the removal of the Rocky Mountain House Buildings to Fort Pitt has been discussed but I have not yet had your final opinion upon the expense thereby likely to be incurred and have to request you to furnish it by first opportunity."

2) Chief Factor Hardisty to Chief Commissioner Grahame, June 8, 1875:

"I hope the arrangements made with regard to the Rocky Mountain House, will prove satisfactory. Angus Fraser was in charge of it for the past winter. I have now given him a small supply of goods at his own expense, and will at the same time, look after the Establishment without any expense to the company.



"I cannot very well come to any satisfactory conclusion, what the rafting down of the Fort would cost. Some think it could not be done with safety, on account of the stormy rush of current against banks of drift wood, and that a large raft could not very well be taken down. I see no other way than first make an attempt with one building, which if a success, the rest could be brought down afterwards.

"The cost of bringing down this one building would be about \$200.00"

3) Chief Commissioner Grahame to Chief Factor Hardisty, January 5, 1876.

"The arrangement about the Rocky Mountain House is satisfactory provided you are certain of recovering the advances you have made to Angus Fraser. I presume your agreement with him gives you the control of any furs he may collect. If the cost of taking down to Fort Pitt one of the Buildings at Rocky Mountain House would not exceed \$200.00 (two hundred) I think it could be advisable to make the attempt leaving the others for the present."

There is no further record to tell us whether one of the buildings was actually taken to Fort Pitt.



A G R E E M E N T

THIS AGREEMENT made in duplicate this 18th day of December A. D. 1911, between John H. Bertrand, of Prairie Grange in the Province of Alberta, Farmer, hereinafter called the Vendor, of the first part; and Earl R. Hill and James Jesse Lundy, both of Prairie Grange aforesaid, hereinafter called the Purchases, of the second part.

The Vendor agrees to sell and the Purchasers agree to purchase the fractional north-east quarter of Section Twenty-two (22), in Township Thirty-nine (39), Range Seven (7), West of the Fifth Meridian in the Province of Alberta, containing by admeasurement one hundred and twenty-seven (127) acres, more or less, for the price or sum of Ten thousand One Hundred and Sixty Dollars (\$10160.00), payable as follows: The sum of Two hundred and Fifty Dollars (\$250.) upon the signing of this agreement (the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged), and the balance on the times and in the manner hereinafter specified.

The Purchasers agree to survey and subdivide the said lands and to submit to the Registrar for the North Alberta Land Registration District, the plans connected with the said survey and subdivision, within one hundred days from the date of this agreement. The Purchasers further agree to have the said lands offered for sale within sixty days from the date of the registration of the said plans by the said Registrar.





The Purchasers agree to pay to the Vendor fifty per centum of the money received on account of the sale of any portion of the aforesaid lands until the entire purchase price has been fully paid, (provided, however, that any assignment of this agreement by the purchasers to the Central Alberta Townsite Company, Limited, shall not be effected by this clause) and the Vendor agrees to furnish the Purchasers, their executors, administrators or assigns, with a clear title to any portion of the said lands upon payment by them of the purchase price of the said portion which area, in the case of a subdivision, must include that portion of the streets and alleys adjacent to the lots or blocks included in the transfer of the aforesaid portion.

The party of the first part shall have the privilege of buying back from the party of the second part, any portion of the above described property, not to exceed six acres in area exclusive of streets, at the rate of Eighty Dollars per acre, the party of the first part to have first, third and fifth choices of the blocks or portions thereof included in the said six acres or fraction thereof.

The Parties of the second part agree that the said lands shall be sold at a rate of not less than One hundred and Sixty Dollars per acre, but nothing in this clause shall refer to or effect any assignment of this agreement by the parties of the second part or their executors, administrators or assigns to the Central Alberta Townsite Company, Limited.



The Parties of the second part agree to pay to the party of the first part the entire amount of the purchase price of the aforesaid lands within seven years from the date of this agreement and to pay interest at the rate of five per centum per annum on the unpaid portion thereof from and after two years from the day of the date hereof till paid.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF the parties hereto have hereunto set their hand and seals the day and year first above written.

SIGNED, SEALED AND DELIVERED	)	(Signed) J.H.BERTRAND
in the presence of	)	E.R.HILL
	)	J.J.LUNDY
(Signed) A.E.BOYD	)	

C A N A D A	)	I, Alma E. Boyd, of the town of
PROVINCE OF ALBERTA	)	Lacombe in the Province of Alberta,
TOWIT:	)	stenographer, make oath and say:

1. That I was personally present and did see John H. Bertrand, Earl R. Hill and James J. Lundy, named in the above instrument, who are personally known to me to be the persons named therein, duly sign, seal and execute the same for the purposes named therein.

2. That the said instrument was executed at Lacombe aforesaid, and that I am the subscribing witness thereto.

3. That I know the said parties, and they are in my belief of the full age of twenty-one years.

SWORN before me at Lacombe in the	)	
Province of Alberta, this 1st day	)	A.E.Boyd.
of February, A.D. 1912.	)	

(Signed) A.M.MacDonald  
A Notary Public  
in and for the Province of Alberta.

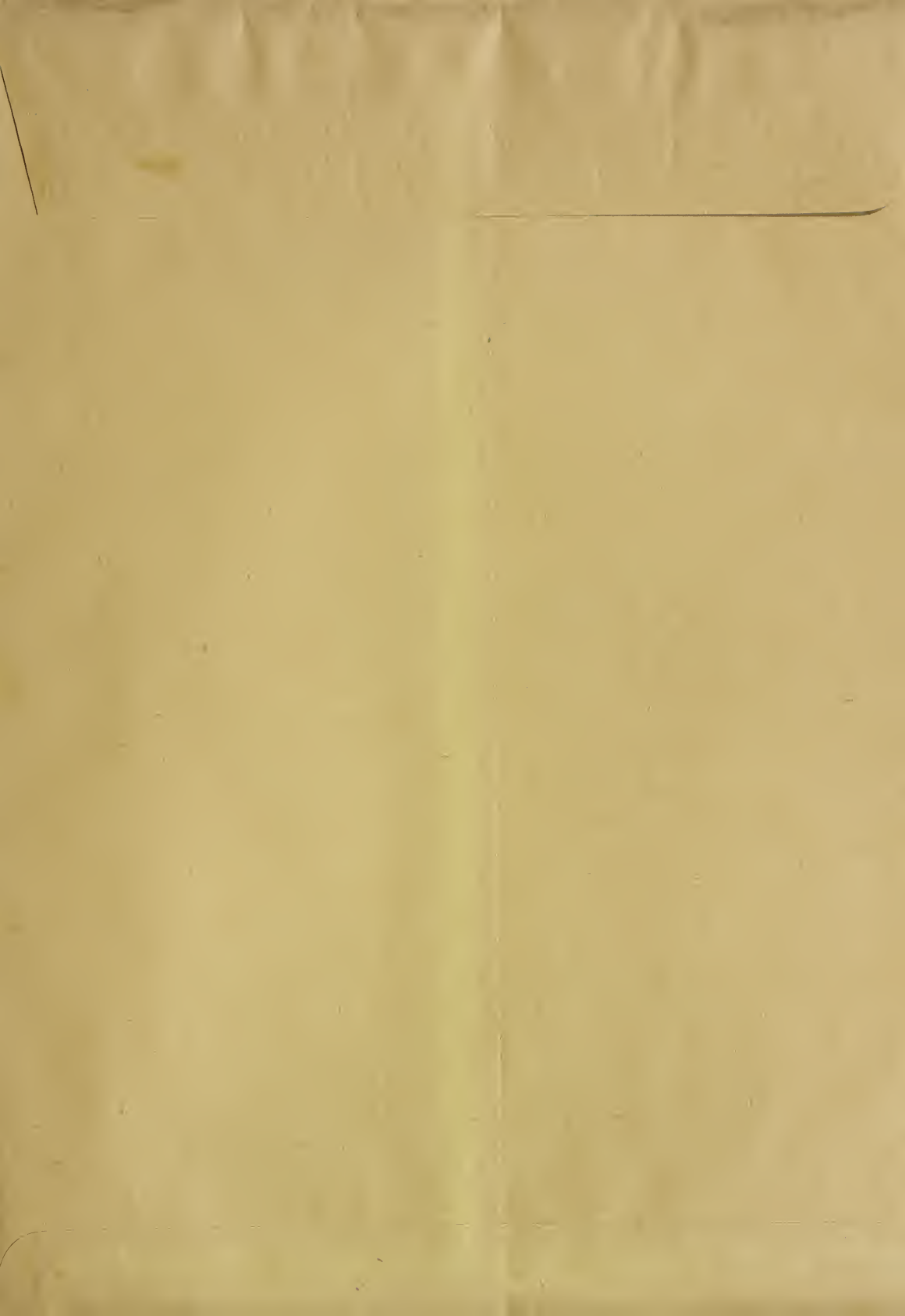






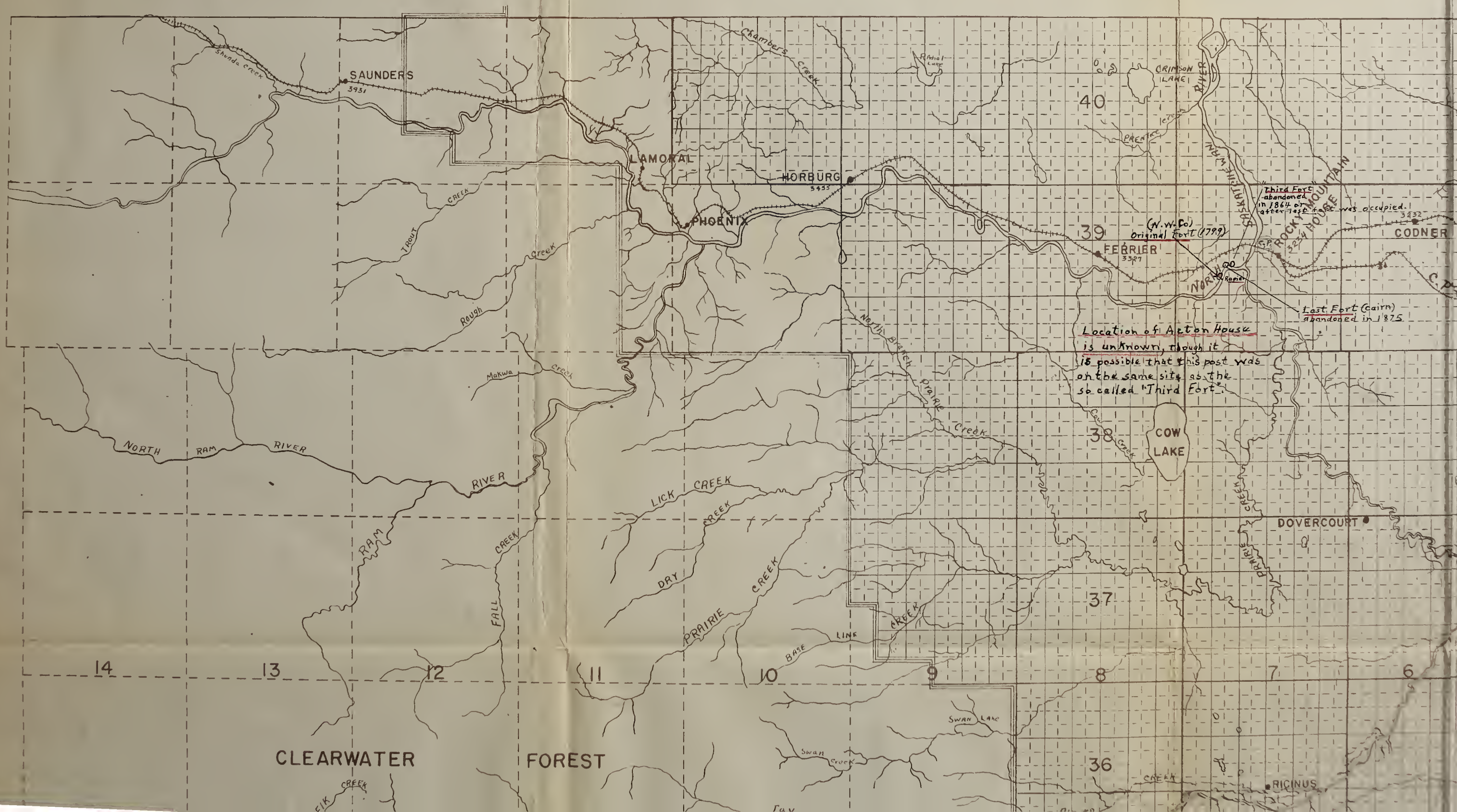






# ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE

Three miles to one inch  $\frac{1}{190,080}$





# MOUNTAIN HOUSE SHEET

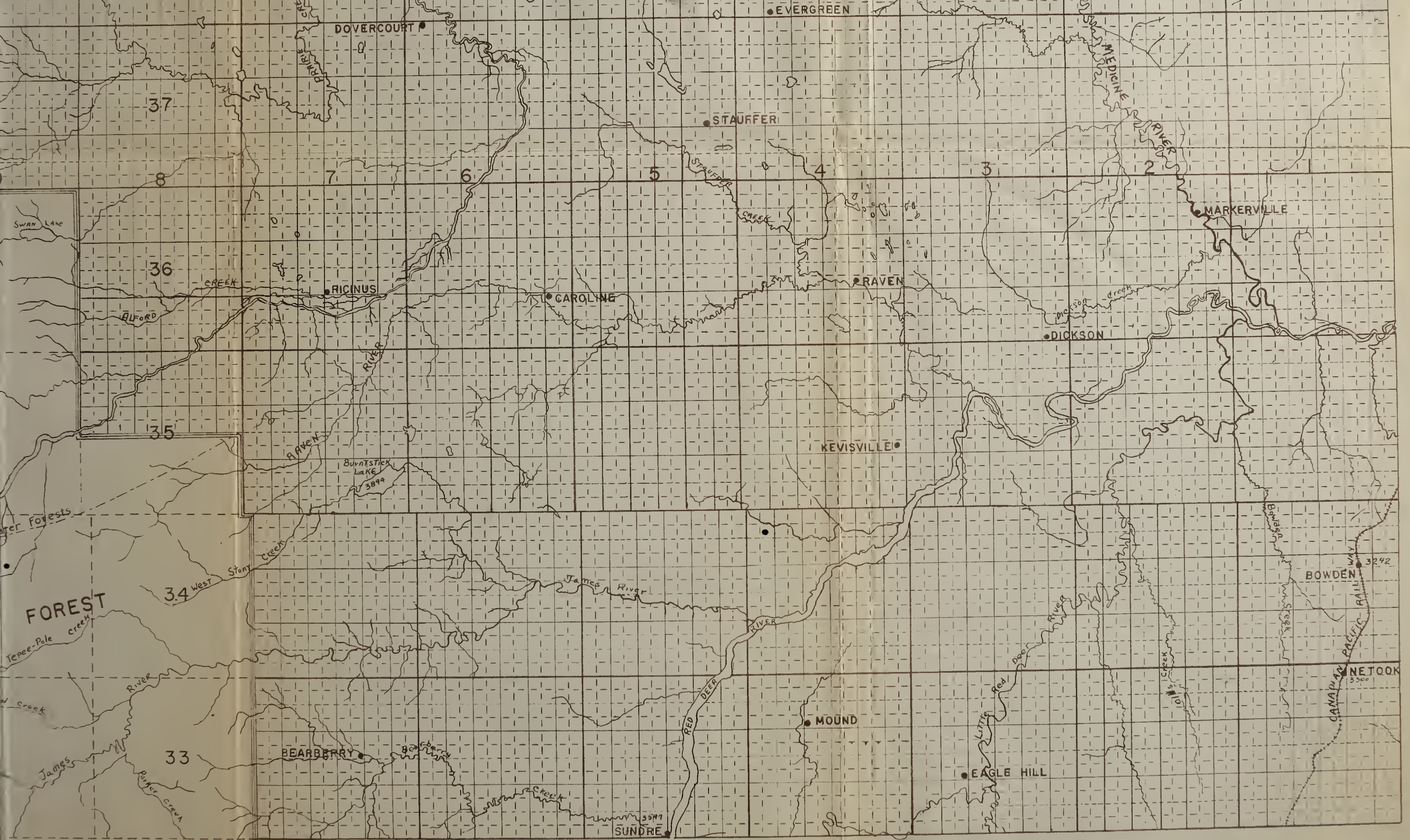
## The Problem of the Forts













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